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OCTOBER

THE DEADDEST
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by FRANK WARD



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BLACK MASK DETECTIVE

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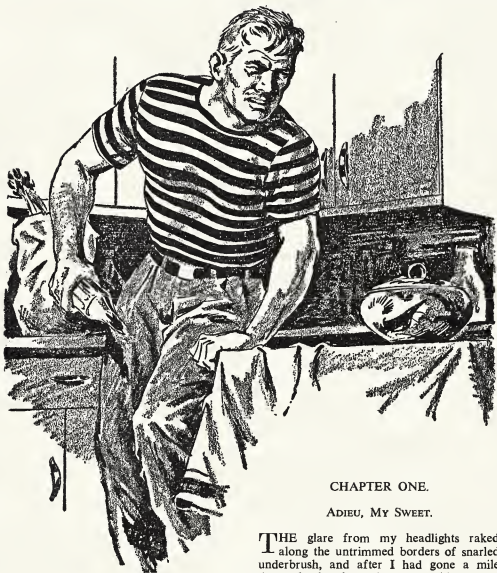
YOUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE ON SALE
--- MONDAY, OCTOBER 20th ---

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By FRANK WARD



It was an animal face, not quite
sane . . .

CHAPTER ONE.

ADIEU, MY SWEET.

THE glare from my headlights raked along the untrimmed borders of snarled underbrush, and after I had gone a mile down the beach road, spread wider across reaches of sandy depressions. I fancied I could hear the sea, hidden out beyond the dunes. I stopped the car at the end of the road, and sat holding my breath and listening to the sound of the waves and inhaling that sharp, tangy smell that comes from salt water and sea grass and clean sand, baked after a day's drying in the sun. I got out of the car and started walking.

In five minutes I was on the crest of the



"A short life and a gay one" was luscious Nancy's motto.

And in no time at all she'd left her husband . . .

THE DEADDEST BRIDE IN TOWN

promontory overlooking the beach cottage, a square, solid blot against the phosphorescence of surf breaking in a long irregular line along the strip of beach. I went carefully down the slope of the dune, filling my shoes with sand. The sand knotted itself into the dampness of my socks until I was limping a little as I came up to the house from the far side.

A brisk breeze had curled in from the sea and whipped the fog away in patches. I stood with my legs braced, shoes digging into the sand; and with some inner sense that I should have left in town, I thought I could hear the muted, delicate strains of a waltz. I stood with my mouth warped in an agonized grin that would gain no humor if I lived a hundred years, my mind wandering in a dark place so far in the past now that it might never have existed. Standing there I could hear the other sounds, the other voices, the muffled tone of a man speaking into a phone.

"I think you should know, kid. A guy like you, he's wasting his time. She's out of your league, boy. You wanted a nice girl, and what did you get? They're only nice girls when their husbands don't walk in at the wrong time, kid, and the two bucks for the license doesn't matter a damn. Go look for yourself, kid."

I'd listened to the click of the phone and shrugged. Then the shrug grew colder and stiffer and the doubt crept in. And I couldn't keep away from here, the rendezvous, hidden away from the road. Hidden away from all the husbands who are the last guys to know until they get a phone call from a man who doesn't leave a name or a reason for telling you.

The breeze fanned gently against the back of my neck. I shivered and closed my eyes for a moment and heard her voice again, soft with a soft harshness that went down into you and into your spine and turned your stomach to water and made you weak in the legs, and I wondered what I was doing here. Me, Peter O'Mara, thirty-one and less than a year married, with a gun in my pocket and a dead spot in my head where my mind used to be.

I took the gun out of my pocket and looked at it queerly, the way a man would look at an axe if he woke up in bed and found one in his hand. Guns were not my business. I held this one out away from me, slackly, and began walking across the sand toward the cottage.

The door had always had a warp to it,

so that you had to lift it to open it, and now it hung ajar an inch or two, and the sand had drifted over the sill. It crunched grittily underfoot as I stepped into the darkness, and the air was flat and stale, as if too many cigarettes had smoldered out there, as if too many sick memories had crawled there to die. There was utter silence in the room. No music, no soft, harsh voice, nothing at all.

I was shaking all over; this was my beach cottage, *our* beach cottage. I walked around the room, throwing quick, darting pools of light in front of me with my flash, although I knew from memory every stick of furniture in the place, because I had paid for it, month after month, until it was mine. I stopped by one wall, my foot crunching on something that lay near the rim of the rug, and I clicked the light switch. Nothing happened.

From the bathroom there echoed the soft purl of water flowing quietly. I threw the beam of light across the room. Water was moving almost silkily from under the closed bathroom door and widening in a fan toward the edge of the rattan rug. The light struck reflections off glasses on the cocktail table in front of the lounge. There were two glasses on coasters with the remnants of two drinks still in them.

I moved my foot and bent over and picked up the dark green swizzle stick my foot had broken in two. Dark green, with a lighter green mermaid. The mermaid's eyes were brilliants that winked at me knowingly, as if she had seen the visitor here and was secretly amused.

I held it tightly in my fist, until the ragged edges of plastic bit into my flesh; it was a very special swizzle stick, my wife's gesture to her drinking public. I twisted it until it broke with another quiet snap and threw the ends toward the fireplace. I leaned one aching shoulder against the wall and stared at the glasses on the table. Under the table lay a pair of beach sandals that were still damp and a bottle that had once held my Scotch and was now empty. Cigarette stubs and ashes lay in confusion on the glass table top. I looked at all this and the doubt rose up in my throat and was no longer a doubt, and I felt sick.

The flash snapped off, leaving me in darkness, and in that darkness I went across the room, toward the closed door with its tide of water growing larger, so that it slopped under my shoes. I pushed the door with a stiff finger and it opened slowly. I shone

the light in, the beam flowing unevenly over green tiles, jumping from the chrome fittings, until it rested on the tub.

She lay curled up modestly there, her back half-turned, but with her head crooked stiffly on her neck, so that she seemed to be blinking up into the beam of light that wavered over the still green water. I looked at her as a man would look at a rock on the beach, and the emotion was dead in me now, and I felt nothing that I had expected to feel. I reached down gingerly and touched her shoulder and let my hand trail in the water. Both were cold. She had been dead for some time. I reached over and turned off the water.

The house was very quiet then. I moved the light down the length of her body. There was a tight hard core of revulsion in my stomach, that I could look upon her so callously, as if she weren't my wife, as if I had never known her before she became this dead thing that lay curled up in the turgid water under my light.

There were no marks on her. Only the long brown cord snaking into the water told the fashion of her dying, and under the water the ivory gleam of plastic and glass that had been a bedside radio. A radio that had once been bolted firmly in wall brackets, so that nothing like this could ever happen to her. One of the brackets, gleaming brass and chipped white enamel, lay on the floor by the tub. I picked it up and slipped it in my pocket, without really knowing what I was doing.

I shifted and closed my eyes to blot her out, just for a moment. Then I went out quickly, smearing my damp hands against the wood of the door where I had touched it, as if it weren't the most natural thing in the world for a husband to leave his mark on the house he owned. I felt, distantly, shame and fear, and a peculiar chill, as if someone had opened a door on a dark and dreary place.

I stood in the middle of the darkened living room, wanting to feel sicker than I did, wanting desperately to hurt as much as a man should when a part of his life is suddenly wrenched away from him without warning. I wanted to feel fury, too, as I had felt it when I heard from the man who liked to spend nickels on blind husbands. I felt nothing but that peculiar coldness, that could have been shock or the last dregs of an illusion that had clung pitifully through ten months of a marriage that had

taken a pitifully short time to become a mockery.

My wife was dead. I was a widower at thirty-one. I was a guy standing alone in a dark room that had grown these last few months to become nothing more than a way station for semi-literate drunks who were always just passing by, or just dropping in for a drink, or just staying for the weekend, so that I never started the long drive out from the city without wondering what bum would be draped over my sofa, or what couple I'd stumble over as I walked down the dune toward the cottage. I was home, and as usual there was nothing there. And when I thought about it, in a confused way, I wondered if perhaps it was because I'd put so little there myself.

I scrubbed my eyes with the back of my hand and reached into my pocket for the inevitable cigarette, and touched the cold, still-wet piece of wall bracket that had held the radio to the wall. I touched it, and for the first time the fear moved out into the open. Suddenly the place was no longer bearable.

I shivered and walked over to the door and stepped outside, lighting the cigarette. I closed the door firmly behind me and walked slowly back the way I had come, feeling very tired and not thinking at all. I came around the bend in the road, reaching automatically for my car keys, and saw the wet gleaming bulk of my car against the lighter backdrop of the sand. I had gone a few paces toward it before I realized that there were two people inside.

They paid me as much attention as if I had come as part of the equipment. There was the usual combination of man and woman, and when I yanked open the driver's door and leaned in and looked at them over the top of the front seat, a wave of bonded air hit me in the face like a swamper's towel. I jarred my elbow on the horn ring, and the man, whose mouth had been glued to the girl's, gave a startled grunt and jerked his head around, peering at me blearily. He had a familiar face, one I had seen somewhere before. I seemed to recall not having wanted to see it again, which would make him one of the people Nancy usually asked out for a week or so. Nothing had happened since then to change that feeling.

I said, "Hello, Eric. Enjoying my car?"

His mouth gaped at me foolishly. His face loomed pale and blotchy in the darkness, shot with wrinkles that had never

known a day's worry. It was a young face, but the revenue stamps on it were age-old and very wise, as a dirty joke is wise. He didn't know me at first. I snapped on the dome light and smiled at him, a friendly smile that hurt the corners of my mouth.

I was beginning to shake a little in the upper arms, as if I had been holding a great weight over my head. I could still hear very plainly the purring babble of water trickling over the edge of a bathtub. I was a guy who had just lost a wife, you understand. I said coldly, "Eric, I don't give a damn that your old man is the mayor. Get the hell out of my car before I plant a parking ticket on your face. Go look for a dry sand-dune."

"Good ol' Pete," he said, grinning at me foolishly. "You got a drink, good ol' Pete?"

I was still smiling my tender smile. I wrapped one hand around the back of his neck and jerked him forward and let him spill sideways over the back of the front seat. He reached automatically for his tie and found he wasn't wearing one; that threw him. He gurgled as a baby gurgles at the sight of his bottle. I slapped him hard across the face, enjoying my work; and then the woman, whom I had ignored, moved. She moved with a sort of leisurely purpose, as if she had been doing some thinking and had reached a decision.

The bottle hit me glancingly across the side of the head, just above the ear. Dimly I heard it shatter, and dimly I thought I heard somebody laughing a laugh that might have been air going out of a tire, a soft, hissing giggle that seemed very unhealthy. I slid down the side of the car, trying to keep my hands up to protect my head and pawing nothing but cold wet metal, and then I rolled over on my face in the damp sand. I could hear the laughter fading, and when the laughter had died I could hear nothing at all but the tumultuous roaring in my head. . . .

CHAPTER TWO.

TELL IT TO THE D.A.

THERE was a thin fine haze in the room. I sat on an uncomfortable wooden chair and kept my eyes focused on the door through the haze and said nothing, and after a time I stopped looking at the door and turned my attention, for what it was worth, to

District Attorney Brady Devlin, behind the desk.

He was a hard little man, with a small man's instinctive quickness of motion. His close-cropped hair shone like worn gun-metal, and his eyes, watching the girl who sat across the desk from him, were at once blue and lazy and speculative. He had a narrow even mouth. He looked like a man who would know when to keep it shut.

He picked up the piece of wall bracket I had found in my own bathroom, where my wife had died, and examined it strangely, as if it had crawled there of its own accord. Then he looked at me and let the bracket fall on the desk blotter. It fell with a quiet thud that did nothing to disturb the boredom of the police stenographer, who was languidly running one dirty thumb over the end of a blunt pencil and yawning with his mouth wide open. The girl gave a convulsive little leap. She was a girl I had never seen before. Devlin turned his head and stared at her thoughtfully.

"Bayliss," he said in his gray gentle voice. "I seem to place that name. Give me a clue."

The girl cleared her throat and threw a hurried glance at me and blushed suddenly. She began rubbing the tips of her fingers together, as if they were cold. "My father was with the traffic division," she said slowly. "Until three months ago. He was crossing a dark street on a rainy night. The car didn't stop afterwards."

She made an impatient gesture with one hand. "I'd like to go home now, Mr. Devlin. There isn't any more need for me here. I've told you all I know about this."

"Sure," Devlin said. He looked at her obliquely. "They ever find the driver of that car, Miss Bayliss?"

She shook her head.

"Too bad," Devlin said. "Before you go, I'd like to run through it again, quickly. Then you can sign a statement and we'll wrap this thing up. Just one or two points I don't quite get. For instance, you say you were driving back from a party at Mayor Morgan's house—" here he cocked his head to one side and gave me a quick look—"in the company of the mayor's son and a woman named Kate Ambruther, the woman who hit O'Mara here with a bottle. Why did you turn off down the beach road?"

The girl made a quick gesture toward her hair, dark brown with a lighter streak running down the part, and kept her eyes away

from mine. She said, "Eric was just drunk enough to want to go calling. He said he knew Mrs. O'Mara quite well, that she'd be glad to see them and they could get another drink there. There wasn't anything I could do to stop them."

"Uh-huh. And when you were almost at the end of the road the car stalled in some loose sand and both the Morgan boy and the woman got out and started walking to the cottage, leaving you in the car."

"Yes."

"Had you ever been down that road before?"

"No. I never had any reason to. Dad and I lived at a place just a little way up the beach, around the headland, but I'd never had any reason to—do any visiting."

Devlin pushed the wall bracket on his desk with one blunt finger. He said, "You waited perhaps twenty minutes, trying to free the car, and when that failed you began walking down the road toward the highway to see if you could get any help. Why not follow the Morgan boy and have him help you?"

Her lips curled. "He wasn't in any condition to help anyone."

"I see. And you had gone a little way when you heard the Ambruther woman screaming. What then?"

"I turned and began running back toward the beach." She paused and bit her full underlip and tried to keep her eyes on her hands, which were moving slowly on her lap, as if they were powers to themselves and had no part of her will. "In front of the cottage I found another car parked. Then I saw Mr. O'Mara."

Devlin grunted at the stenographer, who got up and then walked out, still yawning.

"He was doing what?"

"Crawling. He wasn't far from his car. There were pieces of broken bottle near him and he had a bad gash on his head, just behind the ear."

"And you'd say the wound was fresh?"

"It was still bleeding, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," Devlin said softly.

He leaned back and stretched. "Well," he said. "The Ambruther woman denies having hit anyone that night. She screamed when she and Eric Morgan found Mrs. O'Mara's body in the tub. She admits she was very drunk, but not drunk enough to sling bottles at people." He looked at me. "Or do you really care?"

"I don't give a damn," I said wearily. I

was getting a little fed up with the efficient district-attorney's line he was pulling. I wondered who he thought he was impressing.

"All right," he said finally. "One thing more, Miss Bayliss. What happened to your escort at this party?"

"Eric was it," she said, without bitterness. She stood up and began pulling on her gloves. There was a sturdiness to her and an expression on her face that said she was going out of there, Devlin or no. I wished I could go with her.

Devlin said to me. "Does all this tally with what you remember?"

I said, in a rusty voice, "Yes."

"You knew when Miss Bayliss found you that your wife was dead?"

"Yes."

"Yet you didn't say anything to Miss Bayliss about that? You didn't tell her you knew why this Ambruther woman had screamed?"

"No."

"I see," he said, in a tone of one who doesn't. "How do you explain that?"

"I don't explain it," I said. "I wasn't thinking at the time. I had just been conked with a whiskey bottle, and I wasn't thinking about anything much at all but the pain in my head."

"Uh-huh," Devlin said again. He looked at the girl for a long time. "One thing more, Miss Bayliss, and on a more personal scale. I can't quite place a girl like you and Mayor Morgan's son, if you'll pardon my saying so. I'd think you'd mix like whiskey and sand."

She flushed a little more. "I don't think I have to answer that," she said. "I don't think that has anything to do with this, Mr. Devlin. I think it might have something to do with the fact that you're obviously out for the mayor's scalp." She picked up her purse and started walking across the room.

At the door she paused and looked back at me, her face worried. It was a nice face, but it would never launch a magnum of champagne or throw a city out of gear. There was a slight, crescent-shaped scar at the corner of one eye that gave her a perpetually quizzical look. I thought her mouth was too wide, but I wasn't in any condition to criticize. She nodded to me and I nodded to her, and she went out, closing the door quietly behind her. I could hear the uneven clicking of her heels on the marble floor.

"Well," Devlin said at last, in his soft, impersonal voice. "That's that. I'm sorry about it, Peter, but accidents like that do happen. They happen every day; I suppose they'll go on happening. You want me to handle the details of the burial?"

"You think it would be a good idea if I went away for awhile?" I asked him softly.

He shrugged and tucked a pipe between his teeth and blew through it gustily, making a strange whistling noise. "You don't have to tell me that this is a pretty hard kick in the teeth, Peter. I know how I'd feel, if it happened to me. I knew Nancy pretty well, in the old days. We used to have fun together."

"Sure," I said. "Lots of people used to have fun with Nancy, I'm told."

He winced and studied the palm of his hand. He had a fine profile for a politician, a fighter's profile with a beaten-down nose that would still be attractive to women, and a jut to the jaw that went well with three-column headlines and lots of fresh black type. I had been his purveyor of fresh black type for a long time. I knew him as well as he would let anyone know him. I even liked him a little, the way you will like a man with the god of ambition behind his eyes and a firm step toward the altar of success.

"Do I have to cry murder?" I asked him quietly. "Do I have to get up and yell it? Or have you got a reason for not wanting to hear that word mentioned right now?"

He looked at me sharply, his mouth tightening.

"Perhaps I don't have to tell you about this," I said. "But it takes a heavy hand to tear a radio off a wall when it's been screwed on with three-inch screws. Why the hell do you think I went to all the trouble of screwing it on, Brady? Because I didn't want a radio falling into the water when my wife was in the tub."

I watched him carefully. I said, "I know what you're trying to pass over, Brady. I won't do it for you."

"All right," he agreed mildly. "You don't have to do anything for me. I didn't ask, did I? But accidents happen, Pete; they happen all the time. Look at the statistics."

I told him what he could do with his statistics. "They don't happen like that to women like Nancy. I've told you once. I'll go through it again. She was with somebody, somebody she knew very well. She had drinks with him, she smoked cigarettes with him." The blood swung dizzily around in my brain and the sickness came back.

"Get me, Brady. I don't care who knows it, now. I guess most of my friends knew it anyhow. But she was my wife, still my bride, even; and for some reason that sticks with me. Just enough so that no one can do that to her and go his way. Just that much. Your politics be damned, Brady. Your investigation of the mayor be damned too."

Devlin had stopped studying his palm. He put his hands down flat on the desk and gave his pipe an extra jerk with his teeth. His face was pale except for the twin spots of color over the cheekbones. His skin looked as if it had been scrubbed hard.

"Okay, kid," he said mildly, not looking at me. "If you want it that way, you can push it that way. But you're forgetting a couple of minor points. One, she could have slipped and grabbed the radio and pulled it into the tub with her, three-inch screws and all. Two, you're in a machine, Peter. You go around and around with the rest of us, and you can call it a dirty machine and a dirty business, and you can hate the guts of the people who crank the machine, but you'll go right on being a part of it, just the same as the rest of us. You get two thousand a year out of us, Peter; not much, but more than a lot of City Hall reporters can pull down on the side. You get it for playing ball with us when somebody picks up the bat. That doesn't make you any different from a lot of other reporters who do exactly the same thing. It's no different anywhere else. Maybe it wouldn't work so well if it were different, and maybe the voters wouldn't like us any better if we played it right across the board for them."

"But I'll tell you this, too. The machine takes care of its own. It takes care of them just so long as they're good little cogs, and don't go jumping around in the engine. And that's what you want to do. You want to yell murder. You, the chief witness we have against the mayor, want to give that mayor the chance to turn a murder charge back on you! And don't think he won't, Peter. He'll grab any straw, and you're offering him the whole box. You want me to press an investigation into a death that had much better be tagged an accident and lost in the files."

"Better for whom?" I asked quietly.

"For everybody, and especially for you!" Devlin shouted. Then he smiled apologetically.

"Look, kid, you're too smart to go pulling a boner like this. We know you got a

phone call at the paper earlier last night, because we checked and found out you had. It went through the board; there's a record of it. Right after that you told the operator you weren't to be disturbed. And right after that you went out. If I were prosecuting, I'd say you were trying to establish an alibi. You drove twenty miles to the cottage at night, knowing all the time, and you admit this, that your wife had gone on a shopping trip to Frisco and wouldn't be back for a few days.

"Yet you went. You've been having trouble with her lately, mostly about other men, and the rows haven't been any too private. You had good reason to be sore at her. Everybody knows you had good reason."

"All right," I said roughly. "So it was a lousy match. So I married a girl who wanted to set up housekeeping in a punch bowl. So I'd been fighting with her off and on. So what?"

"So there's a murder motive for you, Peter," he said slowly. "At a time when you can clinch our case against Morgan and his party, your wife dies and you have a motive for killing her. And don't think it can't be used."

His eyes, looking at me across the desk, were very hard and bright. "For all I know, you actually did kill her. Even me, Peter, I can think like that. Maybe I wouldn't blame you. I'm not God; I don't have to judge my friends. But there are plenty of other people who'd love the chance, and once it goes beyond this office it goes out of my hands, and I won't be able to do a thing for you. If you hadn't run into Morgan's son, of all people, you would have been back in the city and no one the wiser. I'm telling you how it looks, Peter, how it will be made to look for you. It's the oldest reason in the world, kid, and it fits you well enough if anyone wants to try it on."

"And you'd like to try it on?"

"Why, hell," he said gently. "You heard what the Bayliss girl said. She goes around with the mayor's son, when she can keep tabs on him. And the mayor would sell what's left of his soul to see you crucified, because if he can hammer in the nails, not only does he steal the best witness we have against him, but he can put on a drive for civic reform that beats anything we can show. And he's still in the driver's seat and will continue to be if you don't smarten up."

He sighed and looked at me. "I'm just telling you what a smarter man would know

without having to be told, Peter. I'm just telling you that your job with the paper won't help you at all, because your paper is run by its advertising, and its advertising is run by the men who are interested in our little red wagon. They won't be going out on any limbs for you, boy, not with all those axes ready to chop down the tree. If this thing is hung around your neck, kid, we'll be able to get along without you somehow. Be smart, kid. As district attorney I can smother this thing, but only if you'll let me. This whole thing was an accident."

The haze in the room seemed to have thickened. I said, very carefully, keeping my voice level with an effort, "Brady, you know I didn't do anything to her. You know that, Brady. And you know just as well that this wasn't any accident."

He cleared his throat and threw the pipe at the ashtray and missed, and reached for a cigarette, never taking his eyes off my face. "As far as we're concerned, kid, you're either lily-white or as black as they come."

He slapped his hands sharply on the desk, so the broken piece of wall bracket jumped and fell off the desk into an empty waste basket with a metallic clang. He got up, and came over and stood directly before my chair, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. His face was even grayer. I thought that perhaps this was hurting him a little, down inside. He looked the way a man with a bad heart looks, without any hope that the sickness will leave him. He began speaking, in his soft, modulated tone, but there was a kind of restrained savagery behind it.

"When I put my finger on you six months ago, I thought I was picking a man who'd been around. You're no punk reporter; you're no sloppy cub scrabbling for hand-outs. I needed a man with a solid head and enough sense to move around without blowing his horn in every dark street. I needed a man who knew City Hall. So I picked you. A man close to the mayor. So much with him that you wouldn't be noticed. A quiet-looking guy you wouldn't pick out in a crowd. And don't tell me I had to twist your arm, Peter. You were married to a girl who liked to live the way no one lives on your salary. You think I didn't know that? You think I didn't know her? You were already up to your ears in debt. I offered you a soft touch, kid. You didn't even have to lose your self-respect to get it, and you know it damn well."

He ground out his cigarette and took another out of the pack and threw the

wrapper on the floor and lighted the cigarette with a hand that shook slightly. The smoke drifted over my head. "Look, kid, I don't want this to happen to you. Mayor Morgan will hop on it like a vulture on a dead crow, and you'll be that crow. His papers will bounce up and down on your face. They'll tear your guts out; they'll press for a conviction until we have to throw you to the wolves. And your word won't be worth an election cigar to anyone. Every damn thing you've done will go against you. They'll nail you to the wall, and they'll use our hammer to do it with. Can't you get that through your head?"

He dropped the cigarette on the rug at my feet and walked around the chair and stood looking out the window a moment.

"So help me God," he said, his voice muffled. "I won't see half a year's work in the ashcan because you've got some noble notion about avenging a murder that could be nothing but a woman reaching for some soap and pulling a radio into the tub with her. I won't see it, Peter. I won't see my chances kicked in the belly because you've got to feel noble about a woman you should be glad to be rid of."

I watched the cigarette burning its way through the nap of the rug. I said, "It's nice of you to put it so gently, Brady. It's nice to know what kind of people I've been working with. It makes me feel real clean inside."

He made an irritated, futile motion with one arm, like a man shooing flies. "Just get away from me, Pete. Just leave me alone until I forget about that six months."

"Sure," I said stiffly. "Any special place you'd like me to be, so you won't have to strain your cops looking for me?"

He turned, lurching a little, his face flushed. His eyes were glazed, almost feverish. He just looked at me.

"All right," I said. I got up and walked to the door. I stood there thinking about where I would go and what I'd do when I got there, and the loneliness in me began to move around like a weak hand in the dark. I felt empty and tired and not a little dirty. I wanted to think about things, and the things I wanted to think about scared me a little.

"All right, Brady," I said quietly. "Let's all be crooks together, eh? Let's all be accomplices in covering up evidence of murder, so you can get ahead in life. It's a tough grind. I wouldn't want to stand in your way. If you want to find me, you know

the road out to the cottage. That's where I'll be. All by myself, for perhaps a week, and then I'll be in another state, or in Mexico, or in any other rat-hole where the rats are a little cleaner."

He stood there, just looking at me. Finally his shoulders sagged and he let out a long breath. He was all worn out from acting like a father to me, from being the *sauve* D.A. turned friend in the hour of need. I thought that perhaps I could hate his guts, once the hate overcame the hollowness in my head. All I would need was a little time to think about it.

"The cottage?" he said, frowning.

"Where else?"

He shrugged. "If you've got the guts to stay there, it's as good a place as any. There's no phone now; no one can bother you very much." He scrubbed his jaw. "Look, Pete. Just another week, is all. Just another week, and we'll talk about this again, and if you feel the same way, all right. We'll take a look at it."

"You won't find anything," I told him, grinning a crooked grin. "After a week you won't even know where to look."

He ignored that, and came across the room, not seeing the cigarette on the rug, and slumped down wearily at his desk. He looked older and a little more beaten, and his mouth was not so firm. At another time and in another place I could have felt sorry for him.

He said, "Stay out there a week, if you can stand it. We'll have our briefs ready by then, and all it will mean will be a few days in court. It may not even come to that. I'll put a man near you to keep the flies off."

I opened the door and started to close it behind me and paused. He didn't look around. The cigarette had consumed half its length on the rug and was beginning to fill the room with the stench of burning wool. I went back and carefully put my foot on the trail of ash and ground it in. He didn't move. I went quietly out, shutting the door behind me, and took the elevator down to the main hall and walked across it, my heels making loud, imperative sounds on the scrubbed tile.

When I stepped through the revolving door, I saw a nondescript man leaning against one of the grooved pillars. He was wearing an old hat, and he had the sad countenance of a Great Dane with ulcers. He looked at me as I went by and nodded his head, so that his face came up into the foggy rays from the lamps over the entrance.

I said, "Hello, Bert," and he smiled sadly and nodded again and said, "Hi, Pete," and went back to his job of holding up the Hall of Justice with his broad back.

He was a homicide man named Bert Henderson, and not given to holding up pillars at any time of day or night unless he had been told to. I glanced at the clock over the entrance. It was three o'clock of a Saturday morning, and I could feel a third strike in the air, a sensation that something about what had been said in Brady Devlin's office was off-color, and I couldn't be quite sure whether it was something I had said, or whether the girl or Devlin had put the faint edge of doubt in my mind.

I walked over to the lot where my car was parked and got under the wheel and was idling the engine when the door on the curb side opened and a woman leaned into the car, her face pale against the lighter collar of the tan polo coat. The scar at the corner of her eye stood out distinctly. We paused there, looking at each other. Over her shoulder I could see Henderson, blending in with his pillar. His eyes seemed to have grown a little.

I said, "You're not in very good company, Miss Bayliss. It's time you were home in bed."

She had her hands thrust into the pockets of the coat, and now she took her right hand out of her pocket, saying nothing. The gun on her gloved hand looked big enough to rate a caisson and a crew of Marines.

She said breathlessly, "It's yours, I guess, O'Mara. I do most of my hunting with bows and arrows."

I took the gun and sat there looking at it stupidly. I had forgotten about the gun; I had overlooked it entirely. I closed my hand around it tightly, feeling her small hand against mine.

She was shivering. She whispered, "I'm sorry, O'Mara. I guess you don't feel much like jokes tonight, but I thought you might want this back. It was lying under you in the road."

And then she was gone. Her car ground quickly into life and she jerked it backwards to clear my rear bumper, then went into first and away down the street with a racket of gears that said her mind wasn't on her driving.

My gun and I sat looking at each other. The gun was oily and black and gritty with sand. I wondered where Brady Devlin and his plans for greater glory would have been if the homicide men had found the gun first,

if they had known for certain that the gun and the premeditation that combine to make first-degree murder had been keeping company with me that night. I wondered if Laura Bayliss would ever have a reason for telling them.

I was still thinking about that when I pulled away from the curb and drifted down the block past Bert Henderson, who obviously had no interest in reporters who drive 1948 Dodge coupes. I thought he was smiling a wet, untidy smile, as if he had just won a bet with himself. He waved at my rear window, a limp wave without much meaning in it. His hand was still half-raised when I hit the corner and turned out of his sight.

CHAPTER THREE.

LOSERS, WEEPER.

I CAME out of the surf that morning and shook some of the water off my back and stood in the warm benevolent sun, looking toward the beach cottage. By day it had all the horror of memory, but none in fact. I went up the beach languidly, and lay down on my stomach in the hot sand and rested my head on my arm. There was a dull, grinding thump going on inside my skull, and the place where the police surgeon's fine two-o'clock hand had woven its pattern of stitches throbbed with a lighter agony, like an off-key symphony.

I had driven out through the last swirling fingers of fog to a gray ocean that dawn, chewing on the taste in my mouth and gritting my teeth to keep my stomach in place. When I got there, I had wanted a steady drink the way a man wants both his eyes. Instead I had rolled up the windows of the car and gone fitfully to sleep on the front seat with my knees wedged against the gear shift and my head on one arm-rest.

In the later day I had gone up to the cottage and opened all the windows, but I hadn't gone into the bathroom, although they had taken her away a long time before. I didn't want to look at it. I wanted nothing to do with the wet tile floor and its scattering of burnt-out flashbulbs and the pile of her lingerie on the wicker wash-basket and the dead, dead smells of the place. I had limped around the house, keeping my mind on the throbbing in my head and the taste in my mouth. I hadn't gone near the bedroom or the kitchen, either, and now I was

hungry with a hunger that made my belly muscles twitch.

I lay on the sand for perhaps an hour, thinking, and the thoughts made a jumbled pattern in my head. Of only one thing was I reasonably certain: someone, with malice aforethought and a fine hand, had murdered my wife. All the talking in the world wouldn't change that, nor all the fine speeches by ambitious politicians bent on keeping me warm and snug in the party fold. It wasn't anything I could explain, but in some involved way I simply knew. And the knowing did nothing to ease the racket in my head.

It was noon before I moved. Then I got dressed slowly and set out down the beach, cutting across the finger of headland, the lank sea-grass whipping at my knees. By one o'clock I could see the cottage where Laura Bayliss had lived with her father before he had been bowled over by a hit-and-run car. I stood for a moment looking at the cottage. Chintz curtains blew gaily in the windows and there was a thin faint racket of radio from the place. I thought maybe if I got a little closer I would smell lunch cooking, and the thought moved my feet.

I came up to the cottage from the rear, the sound of the muted radio growing louder, and tapped gently on the back door. When there was no answer, I walked around to the front and tried again. Nothing happened. The radio played on, as radios will, through a commercial, and began working on the problems of a housewife whose son had run off with a chorus girl. I didn't think that a girl of Laura Bayliss' type would be interested enough to listen. There was no smell of food, no smell of anything but the sea and the sand, and I was beginning to weary of that. I opened the door and stepped into a hall gay with bright splashes of colored throw rugs; there was an elusive fragrance of perfume in the place.

At the end of the hallway I paused again, calling out, and got no answer. The housewife on the radio began to cry softly in a practiced way, as if she had been crying all her life. The radio sat on a small end table beside a leather settee that had an afghan thrown carelessly over it; the walls were touched here and there with small, framed pictures of people and places. One of the people was a lean, hard-looking man with the sun in his eyes and a vaguely embarrassed look on his face, his right arm outstretched with a fish dangling from it. His

hair looked white in the snap, but would probably have been gray.

I sat down on the settee and lighted a cigarette and listened to the housewife. After awhile I got up and turned her off, understanding why the son had left home. I began wandering around the room, picking things up and putting them down, until I came to a desk in the corner. A large manilla envelope lay there, thumb-marked and crinkled as if it had been carried around a good deal, as if the contents had been scanned a lot. I opened the flap and peered inside. Large, glossy prints, also crinkled and bent.

They were not the type of pictures a young woman would keep around the house unless she had strong reason or a taste for the macabre. They showed a man lying face down with his head wedged into a gutter, a man who might once have held a fish in one hand and grinned foolishly at a camera. He lay with that peculiar disregard for posture that the dead usually have, and there were tire marks on his light trench-coat and oily splotches on the material that might have been motor-oil or blood, and under him wet pavement. You could see feet in the picture, as if people were standing about, and one side of a black van that would be the morgue wagon. Near the dead man's head lay a gleaming object that looked as if it might be a foglight from the car that killed him.

I put the photos back in their envelope, feeling a little cold; it seemed somehow inhuman that anyone would want them around, after all this time.

As I laid the envelope where I had found it, the front door opened and I turned to find Laura Bayliss staring at me, her face a dead, chalky white under the tan. She was wearing the same tan polo coat, open now, and under that a plain white dress. She came down the hall, carrying a paper sack, and put the sack down on the settee without saying anything. She took off the coat.

"I just dropped over to see if I could scrounge some lunch," I said lamely. I could feel hot color in my face, and that made me vaguely mad, as if I had spilled down a dowager's neck. "You know how it is."

"No," she said, quietly and without taking her eyes from me. "Just how is it?"

"Look," I said, "I didn't come over here to snoop, if that's what you mean."

"Didn't you?" Her voice was turning cold and there were twin highspots of red over her high cheekbones. "When I came in you were going through that desk, but you weren't

snooping. I'm interested, O'Mara. If you weren't snooping, just what were you doing?"

I sighed and sat down and waved cigarette smoke away from my face. I said, "All right, so I had no business going through your personal matters, if you can call a set of police photos personal. And you can believe it or not, but I did come over here for that lunch, and to find out just why you covered up for me last night. It bothered me. People don't go around doing things like that for anyone, and especially not for men they've never seen before. Not girls who have family connections with the police."

She laughed, a short, bitter sound. "Why complicate something simple, O'Mara? You were a man who had just lost a wife. I thought that might hurt, the way it hurts to lose a father, without any rhyme or sense to it. I didn't think the gun mattered. I've seen a lot of guns in my life."

"There's a difference," I said softly. "There's a difference in my wife's death, though no one else wants to see it. In my circles they call it deliberate murder."

"I heard you last night. I thought you were a little crazy from being hit. You sounded a little crazy then; you don't sound very much saner now."

"Not that crazy. And not crazy enough to fit you into any family group that has Eric Morgan in the same frame. You go to parties with him, and you drive him back into town because he's too lushed up to handle a car himself, and him with some stray bottle-bender he's picked up along the way. That's being too broadminded, Miss Bayliss. Even a first class girl-guide would draw the line there."

She flushed and suddenly turned away, catching up the paper sack and going out into the kitchen. I followed and leaned against the sink and felt for another cigarette.

I said, "Let's pick up the pieces. We've got similar problems, in a way. Let's add them up. You're going around with a spoiled brat who fits you the way a raccoon coat fits a rabbit, smiling when he passes out in your lap, carrying him home to bed and tucking him in, letting him two-time you at every chance, and he'd make plenty of chances. Leading the gay life. You, the movie and soda and home at eleven type. And all the while you keep police pictures of the accident that killed

PSORIASIS

Whatever the extent, and it may be anything from two or three small spots on elbows and knees to large patches on the scalp, body and limbs. Psoriasis is always most distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer.

Psoriasis forms a white lustrous scale on a reddened area of skin. Both the scale and skin are always dry unless broken or brought away by too much force when scratching or combing.

In most cases the reddened skin is of a normal temperature and the scale thick and raised on the skin, especially on the scalp, elbows and knees. Where the skin is of finer texture as on the body, scaling takes place as thin flakes or a light powder. In severe cases all the scales—thick, thin, flake or powder—will come away in shoals.

The onset of Psoriasis varies considerably. It may be hereditary, may occur with puberty, may follow injury, exposure, shock, worry, faulty nutrition or faulty elimination. It may also be persistent and recurring, and sufferers despair of ever having a clear, healthy skin.

A NEW OUTLOOK Brochure for all sufferers

No matter how long you have suffered, no matter how many eruptions you may have, no matter how extensive the eruptions may be, the brochure will bring renewed hope of a clear and healthy skin. It tells of others who suffered for years but have had complete relief. Psoriasis that was very extensive and persistent yielded to a skin without blemish.

Think what a healthy skin means to you. No unsightly scale, nor distressing patches or redness, no irritation and no more embarrassing anxiety when you are at work or with your friends. With a healthy skin you can work with pleasure; you can join freely in sports, recreation and social activities with your friends; you can dress with pride; you can share the freedom and happiness of holidays, a new life is opened out to you.

Here is the opportunity you have sought. Send for Brochure and full particulars of Tremol Treatment. They are of vital importance to all Psoriasis sufferers. Do not despair and suffer needlessly. Write to-day enclosing 6d. in stamps. You will receive the Brochure and particulars by return of post. Address your letter to:—

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF HEALTH
ENQUIRY DEPARTMENT S.M.
GREAT CLOWES STREET
BROUGHTON, MANCHESTER, 7

your father three months ago. No dice. You think I don't know your type of girl?"

"All right," she said suddenly, her voice keying up. "So you know my type. Does that mean I don't like a little fun, just like anyone else?"

"Young Eric is everybody's grief and nobody's fun, kitten," I said.

I walked over to her and put my hands on her shoulders, feeling the trembling of her body. She leaned away from me as far as the edge of the kitchen table would permit, still shaking.

"Look," I whispered, my mouth just touching her hair, "if Eric was at the wheel of that hit-and-run car, you'll never get to first base. Never in a thousand years, and you haven't got that much time for mourning. You can fit him into it—drunk and reckless and not giving a damn, and running a man down on a dark, wet street and not stopping. That would be his kind of crime. But you'll never prove it if you haven't proved it now."

Her head came back, banging against my teeth; she swung around, catching at my arms. Her eyes were tightly shut, the tears moving slowly and quietly down her face, her body jerking a little. I put one arm around her to steady her, feeling sorry for her, and Eric Morgan picked that moment to open the back door. He sauntered in, a towel draped around his thick young neck and a hot, eager look on his face. He got inside the door before he saw us by the table, and stopped there, swinging a little with the force of his own motion.

Laura Bayliss jerked away from me, her face flaming. The boy grinned a small nasty grin and slowly took the towel from around his neck and dropped it on the floor. The bags under his eyes rated express tags, but he seemed bigger now than he had the night before, and there were muscles under his striped jersey that moved when he moved. He came cat-footing toward the table, still smirking, but there was a red, hot look in his eyes that seemed to be no laughing matter. His mouth moved to form a word that had grown up a lot since it left the last washroom wall.

I looked at him, and a small, tight feeling in my stomach suddenly expanded and I began to feel very good. I said softly, "Now that Lohengrin has arrived, you'd better go out and water his horse." Laura made a muffled sound but didn't move.

Ignoring her, the boy stared at me. He

chuckled, a small, dirty sound. "I remember you," he said, as if he were coining a phrase. "You're the bottle baby." The chuckle moved muscles in his throat. He was standing easily now, one hand resting on the edge of the table, and the ease of it should have warned me.

He moved as a fish moves, seemingly without visible effort, scooping up a bottle of vinegar that stood on the table and smashing it on the edge of the table. In the same flowing motion he came up the jagged edges of the bottle. The reek of vinegar was sudden and nauseating in the small, warm room. I could see his face behind the bottle. It was an animal face, not quite sane, not very pretty now. I shoved Laura back and muttered for her to get out of the room. Eric still stood there, holding the bottle.

He lunged suddenly, raking the bottle toward my face, and I ducked and went down on my back, kicking out with one foot and landing my heel on his kneecap. He screamed sharply, and his lunge buckled under the kick. He fell atop me, the bottle jamming into the wooden floor beside my head. As he fell I got one knee up in time to meet him. He took it in the stomach and flopped over, his mouth agape and his face at once purple, his hand tugging at the bottle, his splayed fingers scrabbling for my eyes. I grunted and took his free wrist in my teeth and bit down hard, rolling with his motion, and caught him with the edge of my other hand across the nape of the neck.

He stiffened then, the awareness going out of his eyes, and fell back. I got up, breathing hard, and went unsteadily toward the kitchen sink and rinsed my mouth out. Then I walked back and made certain that he hadn't swallowed his tongue. When I straightened up, Laura Bayliss was standing in the doorway with a police service revolver held rather shakily in one hand.

"A kindly thought," I said weakly. I got the boys' arms over my shoulders and heaved him upright. He drooled unhappily in my ear, his breathing like tires on a gravel road.

We went down the path that led toward the jetty and the small cat-boat moored there. His knees banged against the back of my legs, so that we lurched and stumbled like a couple of drunks doing a fandango, first one way and then the other. He was vaguely conscious when I dumped him over the thwart of the boat and cast off from the

small jetty, conscious enough to mumble his nasty little word, but not conscious enough to know why he was mumbling it. He would have that kind of reflex action, and of a sudden I felt sorry for his father.

I gave the boat a kick with my foot and it rocked out, drifting slowly away from the jetty. I stood there, watching the boat coast out, and I felt dirty and in need of a shave and a bath and a good rinsing out generally.

I no longer felt hungry enough to go back to the girl's place and make polite small-talk around the one thing that stood out most in my mind. I turned and looked at the cottage; the chintz curtains still swung lazily at the windows. I thought if I went back up the path I could scrounge the lunch I no longer wanted. I thought about it for a moment, and about the lonely girl who saved police photos of a father three months dead.

Then I began walking along the rim of the beach, back the way I had come.

CHAPTER FOUR.

THE DARK FACE OF MURDER.

I HAD company for supper, what there was of it. I woke up from an afternoon nap and lay for a long time in the early dusk, staring up at the ceiling and wondering why I felt as if I had been spitting on someone's grave, and recalling the morning with no particular joy. I had been lying there for awhile when Bert Henderson came over the crest of the dune, wading along dispiritedly and still wrapped up in his faded trench-coat, as if he thought that exposure to the setting sun might be harmful. He walked the way a man walks when he feels that he has some grudge against his feet. He had a paper bag under one arm.

He came in without knocking and put the bag down on the table and stood by it staring at me with his sad, wistful eyes. He shook his head dismally. "It must be wonderful to have pull," he said unhappily. "It must be just wonderful to sit out here in the sun and wait for some poor dumb cop to bring you your groceries. How do you do it?"

I just looked at him and said nothing.

He shrugged and sat down without taking off his coat and continued to paw me with his brown, doggy eyes. "Maybe it's tougher than I think. I understand you

been throwing your weight around on the poor unfortunate rich, kid. I understand you knocked the poor fella cold. Haven't you got enough trouble?"

I looked at him coldly. "Go on," I said, "get it off your belly. There must be an awful lot of it to cover that much area."

"You see?" he said unhappily. "Not a kind word for anyone. Some people might figure it was because of—that," and he jerked his head toward the bathroom door.

"But I doubt it." He found a cigar and clamped his big, horny white teeth into it and went on, in a muffled voice, "A little advice for you, baby. Don't go fussing around with the Bayliss kid. We got sort of a soft spot in our hearts for her downtown. We wouldn't want her to suffer any embarrassment."

"You wouldn't want to do anything about finding out who drove the car that killed her father either," I said nastily. "That would look too much like work."

Henderson sighed. "Aw hell. Maybe I'm just sore because I'm a homicide cop and don't make as much money a week as you." He had a dead voice that seemed somehow to perspire a little when he used it. He didn't appear to be very interested in what the voice was saying. "A thing like that bothers a man after awhile, I guess." He looked at me plaintively.

"We found a fog lamp beside Bayliss," Henderson said drearily. "A Lucas, English make. We found out the Morgan kid drives one of those fancy English sport cars, also with Lucas lights, but we didn't get very far with it. Seems there are a lot of other English sport cars around, here and there. Seems we didn't have any right to go any farther with it." He smiled at me, without any emotion I could see, and reached over for a banana and sat waving the fruit in the air, as if to cool it off. He took the unlighted cigar and put it back in his breast pocket.

"To get back to the matter at hand," he continued, with his mouth full, "and to why a guy like me might get sore at a guy like you. Maybe it's because I get a funny feeling when I come into a man's house, running errands for him because the D.A. tells me I should keep an eye on him, and all the time I'm thinking, 'Now here's a guy who's got it soft. He's got cops carrying his eats for him, so he won't have to go out in the public eye; and all the time he's sitting in the same house where his wife was murdered, and he doesn't seem to

mind.'" He dropped the banana skin on the table and swung his bulk around and peered at me in the half-light.

I got up and probed around in the bag, not yet quite awake, and found a banana and peeled it and stood by the table eating it and not enjoying it very much. The liquor I had drunk when I had come back from the Bayliss girl's place burned like an old oil-lamp in my stomach.

Henderson looked at the half-frozen grimace on my face and sighed. "I guess that could be it. I guess it isn't nice for a guy to sleep in the same house after his wife has gone like that, and to know that her going wasn't any accident, like everyone makes out, and to be doing nothing about it. I wouldn't like that myself. I guess perhaps you don't go for it either."

"You guess too much."

"Not as much as you think." He stood up, grunting, and walked over and looked out the window toward the sea. "Nice view here. Nice beach. A man could come up that beach at night and nobody would even know he was around, the noise that water makes. On a foggy night, you could do it easy. Maybe even easier, if you were expected. Man could say it was a shame for a girl to be stuck out here away from all the bright lights, with no one to look at her, no one to give her a loving word. If I were going to do what was done here, that's the way I'd do it. And I'd pick the night after she was supposed to have gone to Frisco, so's no one would think it odd if she didn't show up at all the usual places; maybe I'd even suggest we go to Frisco together, just to make it easier. If I were doing it, I'd make it an easy kill, the kind of a thing that could happen to any girl in any bathtub. No violence, kid, no marks. Who called you at the paper, kid? Who tipped you off?"

"I don't know," I said. I felt numb and a little chilled.

"Sure you don't," Henderson said soothingly. "I don't get that call either. Who wants a witness to a murder? Somebody trying to frame you, Pete? Somebody trying to fit you in?" He shook his head. "Too clumsy, to call you and not call us. The long arm of coincidence? I don't buy that stuff by the yard in my business."

He swung around and there was no humor in his face, and the dogginess was gone from his eyes. He reached over and flicked the switch of a table lamp, and when

nothing happened, mumbled and muttered and fumbled through his bulging pockets again and plucked out a house-fuse and began walking around looking for the switch-box.

"In the kitchen," I said.

He smiled and tossed me the fuse and said sleepily, "You go put it in, Pete. My feet hurt."

When I came back he was standing by the bathroom door, his bulk filling it. I said derisively, "You must have your life insurance paid up, Henderson. I couldn't miss you with my eyes shut."

He grunted and said nothing, and went on staring at the bath tub as if the sight of it fascinated him completely. His shoes squished in the water that remained after most of it had trickled down the floor drain. The radio was gone, the woman who had been my wife was gone, but the dead smell of the place lingered, like the reek of flowers in a funeral home. The smell of it clogged my throat.

Henderson's face was a complete and wooden blank; he stared at the wall and made a pushing motion with his hands and picked up one of the bracket screws and peered at that, turning it over in his thick fingers, and sighed again. Then he lumbered past me and stood in the middle of the living room like a tent without a ridge-pole.

"What'd you do with the gun the girl gave you last night?" he asked abruptly, not bothering to turn his head. When I didn't answer, he peered over his shoulder at me, his eyes vaguely disturbed. "Don't get fussy with me, Peter. What'd you do with the gun?"

I pointed to a table drawer. He retrieved the gun and stood turning it over in his hands. Then he put it down on the table and picked up his cigar and slumped down heavily in his chair.

"That looks effective," I said, sneering a little. "You ought to go to Hollywood, Henderson. You'd make a fine movie cop. They'd have you lurking in dark, foggy alleys in no time. I like the cigar routine, too."

He took a long breath. "Why don't you relax, Pete? With you it's always the smart crack. Look, kid, I've been a cop for fifteen years, ten of it on homicide, and after all that time a punk politician comes along and tells me to lay off. He tells me it's all an accident and his department will handle it. He tells me to go home and play Canasta with my wife and just forget about every-

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £32 10s. Please send two more."
B. C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931

JOAN THE WAD

is the Lucky Cornish Piskey
who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER
FROM THE LUCKY SAINT'S WELL

AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that—, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000, he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the Public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly GUARANTEE that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Send at once for full information about this PROVED Luck Bringer. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

"SUNDAY GRAPHIC" PICTURE PUZZLE.

No. 175.—"Dear Joan the Wad, I received this week cheque for £71 8s. 7d. My share of the £1,000 Prize of the 'Sunday Graphic' Picture Puzzle. I have been near winning before, but you have brought me just the extra luck I wanted."—F. T., Salisbury.

WON £153 17s. THEN £46 10s. 3d.

No. 191.—"Genuine account of Luck... since receiving Joan the Wad... I was successful in winning £153 17s. in the 'People's Xword No. 178 and also the 'News of the World' Xword No. 280, £46 10s. 3d., also £1 on a football coupon, which is amazing in itself, as all the luck came in one week."—A. B., Lymington Spa.

WINNERS OF £6 11s. 1d.

No. 195.—"My father, myself and my sister had the pleasure of winning a Crossword Puzzle in the 'Sunday Pictorial,' which came to £6 11s. 1d., which we put down to JOAN THE WAD, and we thank her very much."—L. B., Exning.

WON PRIZE OF £13 13s.

No. 214.—"Arrival of your charm followed the very next day by the notification that I had won a prize of £13 13s. in a Literary Competition."—F. H. R., Wallington.

"DAILY HERALD" PICTURE CONTEST.

No. 216.—"Since having received JOAN THE WAD I received cheque, part share in the 'Daily Herald' Picture Contest £3 1s."—M. E., Notting Hill.

£30,000 WINNER.

No. 222.—"Mrs. A. . . . of Lewisham, has just won £30,000 and says she has a JOAN THE WAD, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V., Bromley.

FIRST PRIZE "NUGGETS."

No. 238.—"I have had some good luck since receiving JOAN THE WAD. I have won First Prize in 'ANSWERS' 'Nuggets.' I had JOAN THE WAD in February, and I have been lucky ever since."—Mrs. N. W., Wolverhampton.

WON "DAILY MIRROR" HAMPER.

No. 245.—"I have just had my first win since having JOAN THE WAD, which was a 'DAILY MIRROR' HAMPER."—E. M. F., Brentwood.

WON "NUGGETS" £300.

No. 257.—"My Husband is a keen Competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him JOAN THE WAD, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week FIRST Prize in 'Nuggets' £300."—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

CAN ANYONE BEAT THIS?

No. 286.—"Immediately after receiving my JOAN THE WAD I won a 3rd Prize in a local Derby Sweep, then I was given employment after seven months of idleness and finally had a correct forecast in Picture Puzzle 'Glasgow Sunday Mail,' which entitles me to a share of the Prize Money."—W. M., Glasgow, C.A.

All you have to do is to send 1/- stamp (Savings Stamps accepted) and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to

223, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL

For Canada and U.S.A., send 50 cents for History, or \$2 for both History and Mascot.
For Australia, send 1s. 6d. for History, or 8s. 0d. for both History and Mascot.

thing. As if it never happened. What am I supposed to think about a thing like that?"

"Maybe you're not supposed to think at all. Ever look at it that way?"

"I've looked at it that way. I've looked at it another way. Somewhere in my district is a man or a woman who has committed murder, for no reason I can think of. Maybe you. Last night I thought it was you, because it all pointed that way. But then I see Laura Bayliss giving you something that looks very much like a gun, and when I check on it, I find there's a gun registered in your name, and I began to think, maybe not you, maybe not Peter O'Mara at all, but someone who is going to profit in one way or another from the death of Peter O'Mara's wife. I'm still working on that."

He shot me a strange look and sighed. "Look, kid, this is no stray kill. All this happened because it was supposed to happen, and because someone wanted it to happen. Don't you get the pattern? It's been almost a year since you got married, Pete, and in all that time nobody makes any trouble for either of you; yet the same situation existed between you both six months or eight months ago that prevailed up to last night. All the trouble you had you made together."

"But nobody killed her just for the killing. There's no homicidal maniac wandering around in the bull-rushes with a bloody axe under his arm. No passion at all. Just plenty of thinking and plenty of time to think about it. That's why I can't place you in it, no matter how hard I try, and I've tried hard enough because in some ways you looked very good in the part. I was trying hard last night when I saw the girl give you that gun. There was only one place you could have lost it, only one time she could have picked it up, and that was when she met you for the first time just after you found your wife's body."

"Sure, you came out here last night with one idea in your head and a gun in your hand. That would fit you. The phone call to bring you out, eager to kill, eager to hurt someone who'd managed to hurt you where you live. But not you sitting out here with a bunch of stews, planning to make a radio fall into a bathtub while your wife was in it. Not you loosening the screws so she couldn't help pulling it off."

His cigar had gone out. He began patting his pockets wearily, blinking his sad brown eyes, and got up and stumped

over to the fireplace and took a match from the mantel and scraped it on his heel. After he had dropped the spent stick he bent over laboriously, groaning, and straightened up with some shards of dark green plastic in his hand and stood looking at them, and then at me.

He brought the shattered swizzle-stick back and tossed the pieces on the table with the two long screws he had found in the bathroom, sat down, and peered at them with his eyes half-shuttered, as if all he wanted in the world was two hours sleep. The cigar made rancid halos in the dusky room.

"You aren't thinking, Pete," he said softly. "You are a household guy, you aren't using your eyes or your head, kid. Didn't you ever pull a screw out of a plaster wall, Pete?"

I had it then. I rubbed my finger along the threads and a little plaster adhered to my damp skin.

"Nobody pulled them out," I said slowly. "They were unscrewed first. There isn't enough plaster between the threads . . ."

He gazed at me somberly and got to his feet. "Sure, he said, 'that's it. That's why I came out here today. That's what I was looking for—just enough to tell me that I'm right and Delvin is wrong, or is trying to be wrong.' He smiled a mournful smile. "And this junk?" he asked, pointing to the pieces of green plastic.

"Don't you ever drink?"

"Just beer, on my salary."

"What's left of a swizzle-stick," I told him wearily. "Something my wife had made up specially. I broke it when I came in last night. It was lying on the floor."

He grunted and dismissed that from his mind and slouched across the room, pausing by the door and peering back at me in a vaguely sinister fashion.

"It gets dark all of a sudden out here," he said queerly, his eyes on the window. "Maybe a little later on I'll come back and tuck you in for the night, kid."

He opened the door, having trouble with the warp, and stood limned against the light from the room, peering out toward the ocean, his head cocked to one side. Then he grunted and closed the door behind him and I heard the scuffle of his feet in the sand, going away, and then the silence closed in like a damp sheet.

I blew out my breath and walked back to the table and stood looking at the paper

CHAPTER FIVE.

PRIMED TO KILL.

bag of groceries and the gun beside it, and the two screws that hadn't been pulled from any plaster wall but had been carefully unscrewed, with premeditation. I stared down at them and at the plastic chips and the mermaid whose bright eyes returned my stare unwinkingly. And looking at them, I knew I'd had about enough of this. I turned and started across the room toward the telephone table, intending to call Brady Devlin, and was half-way there when I remembered I had had the phone taken out the week before, thinking I could get some peace that way.

I examined the empty table with care, and sat down stiffly on the settee in front of the fireplace, letting my mind give its feet a preliminary shuffle. I began thinking about what Henderson had said, and what Henderson had said intimated an ugly fact. I looked at the two glasses and the mess on the cocktail table, at the glasses with their thin layer of Scotch that seemed to move smokily in the light, and it was as if I could see two people sitting here talking earnestly, and it was almost as if I could hear the talk and the theme of the talk.

It would have been about money or position, or both. There would be only one way in which my late wife could have driven money out of any of the people she knew; the word roiled hot and slimy in my mind. She had known something that she shouldn't have known; and the knowing had been a tool to her, and the tool had turned in her hand and killed her. She had been blackmailing someone.

I started to laugh and caught myself snickering like an idiot and stopped on a high note, because there was nothing to laugh at. She had been playing checkers with murder, and she had lost the last move, and whatever she had known had gone silently down the drain with the water in which she had died. I took a long breath that hurt my chest and ran one hand up and down my jaw and was surprised to find that I had a stubble that scraped my palm.

I held the hand away from my face and examined it closely; I splayed the fingers, and as they twitched open the door moved with a small convulsive jerk and began opening not at all quickly. I sat there by the table watching the door opening as if I had been waiting there all day for it to open and reveal a friend.

But the man who stepped into the room was no friend.

HE MOVED with a thought-out precision, his mouth twitching a little with the concentration he was giving it. He had a gun in his hand, a .22 target pistol that jerked to the right and then to the left as he moved. He swayed a little, licking at his lips, and raised the gun very carefully and pulled the trigger. The .22 went off with a report that was like a signal gun in the room, and a vase on the mantel shelf broke quietly and tinkled on the hearth.

He laughed then, a nice, healthy boyish laugh. His hair hung dankly over his sweaty forehead. A wisp of smoke trickled up from the muzzle of the gun. He said his nasty word and slobbered a little over his full lower lip. There was a bruise over his cheekbone that I had given him on Laura Bayliss' kitchen floor that morning. I could see the memory of it burning into him, and I thought perhaps that bruise would kill me.

"Get up, you. . . ." he said silkily. His voice was just a whisper on the night air.

I got up, slowly, trying to keep my eyes off the black muzzle of the gun, trying to show him I wasn't afraid of him. I was scared silly of him.

I said harshly, "How'd you come in tonight, kid? Up from the sea, the way you did last night? What'd my wife do to you, kid? Laugh at you and tell you to scamper home to your old man? That why you killed her, junior?"

He said his word again, more strongly this time, as if he had finally got the robust swing of it after all those years of practicing, and leered at me. He was drunk or doped or both, and he could never have driven a car this far, but he had the kind of a mind that would clear a little with the popping of a sail above him and the firm thrust of a tiller under his hand. Up from the sea, and again to kill.

"Let me tell you," I whispered. "Let me tell you how it happened. You came and you killed and you went away and got drunk, and in the liquor you came back to see if it was all right, to see if I had paid any attention to your phone call, to see if she was really dead. You had to have your final look at her, there in the tub where you killed her. You had to know she was dead, that her mouth was dead, just as dead as the man who went down under your

wheels that other night three months ago—the man you didn't stop to help, and who might have lived if you had stopped. She knew about it and she was going to tell on you if you didn't pay, and you had to kill her to stop that."

I took another step toward him and he shot again. One of the glasses on the table fell apart with the same quiet efficiency and the same economy of sound. The ejected cartridge case bounced off the wall and fell by the edge of the rug. I paused, sweating coldly, my mouth open a little.

"You're all mixed up," I said hoarsely. "You're walking around in a man's body, but you're still eight years old. You can't have all your own way, so you're going to hurt somebody until you get it. You're scared silly and you don't know why. Did she tell you that, Eric? Did she laugh in your face and push you away and tell you that, kid?"

He put his back against the door, his face pale and flat and quite without expression. Only the hatred in his eyes remained, diluted now with uncertainty, as if he didn't really know what I was talking about, as if all this was just so much sound that washed around in his head and stalled off the time when he could get back at me for what had happened earlier that day. He was that kind of a boy; walk on his lawn and he'd throw a brick, and if the brick missed, run to his old man for an axe. He held the gun up in front of his face and thrust the muzzle at me.

I laughed and started across the room toward him, getting ready to jump out of his way and wondering all the time what it feels like to get shot in the face, even with a .22.

I never found out. The glass in the windows shattered, and sound and flame followed it in one continuous roar. The boy dropped his little gun on the rug and stood up on his toes, his face a shocked, blurred oval of horror. He swayed there, trying to move his feet, then fell forward. He fell against the table, spilling the sack of groceries, and scrambled at the edge of the table, trying to say something and losing the words in a welter of blood. The gun in the window went off again and he slid limply to one side and became very still on the floor.

Brady Devlin chopped methodically at the remaining glass in the frame with the barrel of his gun and looked into the room, his face twisted. His eyes jumped from the

body of the boy to me and he seemed to shiver slightly. Then he shoved the window frame up and climbed into the room, brushing at his neat gray business suit, still holding the gun in his right hand.

He paused just inside the window. There was a sort of horror in his eyes, a sort of terrible fascination. He knelt down by the boy and rolled him over, lifted one eyelid, stood up.

"I waited almost too long," he said shakily. "For a second I thought I wouldn't quite make it."

"You made it," I said. I sat down listlessly on the settee and began rubbing my aching leg muscles. "Just like the Marines in a movie." I thought that was funny. I started to laugh, and the laugh turned sour and my stomach heaved.

I bent over the kid and looked at him for a long time. He had been dying before the second bullet caught him at the table. He was as dead now as he ever would be, and the things he had been trying to say were just as dead. I thought he might have been trying to get his favorite word out, just to prove he could still remember it.

"How much of it did you get?" I asked Devlin.

"Most of it. The part about the Bayliss killing, for one." He put the gun away distastefully and stood rubbing his hands on his trouser leg, not looking directly at me. "Nobody told me anything about that," he said bitterly. "That damned homicide department never tells you anything."

"You know now," I said. "It should make nice reading in the morning editions. It should go over with the voters at the next election. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what you want more than anything else in this world."

He winced and sighed. "I guess that's what I want. I'm sorry it had to happen this way. We could have got along without this."

"Sure we could," I said softly. "But this way it's better. This way the boy can't deny anything. He can't talk back."

He glanced at me sharply, and then down. He said, "We'd better go shovel Henderson into the car and take him into town. The kid nearly knocked his head off with a billet of driftwood. I stumbled over him coming in."

I leaned one arm on the table. I said, "You could have phoned me, Brady. You didn't have to come all the way out. I wasn't going anywhere."

"Just as well I did," he grunted, looking down at the boy. "You haven't got a phone, anyway."

"I know," I said, very gently. "I know all about that. I live here. Remember? I live here and I had the phone taken out a few days ago, just before my wife was due to leave for Frisco, because we weren't going to stay out here when she came back. I thought maybe I could change things if we lived in town. You'll pardon me for laughing. There isn't any town in this country that would change my wife. She wanted money and she wanted prestige and she wanted social position, and those are a few of the things I didn't happen to have."

I put a cigarette in my mouth and let it dangle. I said, around the cigarette, "Tell me one thing, Brady. Tell me the one thing that's been bothering me ever since I left your office. How come you knew there wasn't any phone out here, Brady?"

Devlin looked at me for a long time. Then he smiled, just a twitch of his thin, narrow mouth, and half turned toward me.

"Well," he said quietly, "in a way I'm glad you know. You can't understand how much of a strain it's been, Pete."

"I can try," I said. I was shaking all over, so that the table shook, too. "I can try to imagine what it must be like to play around with another man's wife, and to have her turn the card on you and name her price. What was that price, Brady? That you marry her and carry her on to fame and fortune as the great Mrs. District Attorney, bound for the governor's mansion? Was that it?"

"More or less," he admitted calmly. "Listen, boy, I knew Nancy a long time before you ever heard her name. It had always been like that between us, all the time. She was a hell of a woman. Then she met you, and that was that, for the while, and then we found out that nothing ever really changes. You know what I mean, kid?"

"I know what you mean," I said. "Maybe I can even understand it. Fun to play with, but not so good to be tied to. She'd ruin you in a year."

He chuckled. His right hand had moved an inch or so. I thought it would keep right on moving, unless I did something to stop it. I wondered what I would do, when the time came.

"You see, Brady," I went on conversationally, "I've had a lot of time to think, and the one thing I kept thinking

about was the neat, methodical way of it all. No heat or passion. No insane rage. And that ruled little Eric out. That and the fact that my wife would have been smart enough to have gone to Mayor Morgan himself, and not to the kid, if she had known about the Bayliss hit-and-run. No, everything about the way this murder was done pointed to you, Brady. That and the phone that wasn't here. Only Nancy and I knew that. Nancy and I and the man who came out in the dark foggy night to kill her. Just the three of us."

He nodded, but I knew he wasn't listening. He said, softly, "We can make a deal on this, Pete. We can smooth it out."

"Sure," I said, laughing. "For you, always the deal. Make this one with the man who drops the cyanide pill into the bucket of acid under your chair, Brady. See if he'll listen to you telling him that she wasn't worth any career you had in mind. See if he'll give you another minute of breathing for that."

I let the cigarette tumble from my lips. I went on, "It must have been a tough spot for a man like you, fastidious and careful and ambitious, to find that she was a rope around your neck. You couldn't just walk out on her because the scandal would ruin you, and yet, when you killed her, you couldn't pin it on me because you needed me and I wouldn't be any good to you dead. What's in your mind now, Brady?"

His eyes came up to meet mine. I saw the flicker in them and brought my hand off the table with the .45 automatic in it and threw the gun at him in one unbroken overhand motion. He screamed a high penetrating scream, spilling blood down the front of his coat, and fell back against the wall, pawing foolishly for his gun. He didn't get it out before I hit him.

I hit him with all I had, and then I hit him again. He didn't have a chance to fight back. He fell back against the wall, whimpering a little, and I grabbed his coat and held him up. I wanted to kill him, but when he sagged, I let him go. He slid down the wall and I stepped back, rubbing my knuckles to get the feel of him off me, to get the dirtiness out of my mind.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped. It was Henderson. There was a knot on his head the size of an egg. He walked over to Devlin and prodded him with his foot. Then he turned to me and nodded, very slowly, and I knew he had overheard enough.

NOBODY LOVES A COP

By DENNIS WIEGAND

*To Sergeant Oliver, cops were dames and dames were poison.
Then he got stuck with a lush little blonde who was definitely
all three. . . .*

HERE in mid-block, and with the street lights' glare accordingly softened, the old brownstone house let one look into the past a little. Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver knew only too well how scarred and dismal those facades looked by daylight. Every officer assigned to the Vice Squad knew the street and the district well.

He propped himself, half-sitting, against the iron railing that ran along the sidewalk, guarding the concrete pit of a basement entrance to what had once been a mansion. As he lit a cigarette, he wondered about the people who had built the house. Such unlikely musings for a policeman, he supposed, were prompted by the fact that everybody and his sisters and his cousins and his aunts were busily writing cute little books of reminiscence about immediate ancestors.

The clicking of the girl's heels in the silence of the deserted street brought him sharply back to the tawdry present. He took in at a glance the too-bright blonde hair and the lush figure outlined against the distant street light.

He thrust out one long leg to halt her as she came sauntering abreast of him.

"Just a minute, sister," he said, letting the cigarette cling to the corner of his lips. "You're new around here."

"So what?" she demanded. "You own the block or something? Outta my way, lug."

"Practically," he said. "Just figuring out what I don't own so I can go around first thing in the morning to buy it."

"Big operator, huh?" sneered the blonde. "Well, I already got a apartment. So move that gam before I tear it off and throw it across the street to the cats."

He added an arm to the barrier already set up by the outthrust leg.

"I want to talk to you, kid," he said. "Your time's not so valuable."

"Sure, go ahead. I got all night." There

was the oily snicker of metal and then a slight clatter.

"That's just so you don't run off and leave me and break my poor little heart," she explained.

The headlights of a parked car, fifty yards down the street, flared to life. A spotlight probed briefly and then found them. By its light Sergeant Oliver saw what he already felt. He was handcuffed quite completely to the iron railing.

"What's this angle?" he asked calmly, sliding his free right hand inside his coat.

"Don't be a sucker," the girl advised him curtly. "That's a police car over there. You be a good boy and you get a chance to ride in it. Alive."

The familiar flat-footed tread of heavy men told him, without looking, that she was telling the truth. One of the plainclothesmen was dangling a blackjack casually at his side.

"Nice work, pal," said one of the detectives.

"Oh, brother," laughed the other. "Take yourself a second look!"

"Oh, no!" said the first detective. He covered his eyes with one big hand as if to ward off the sight of a particularly pitiable object.

"Oh, yes,!" the second officer assured him. "It's the Sir Galahad of Headquarters Vice. Be careful. That cuff won't hold him—his strength is as the strength of tén, for his heart is pure."

"The act'll go big in vaudeville, boys," cut in the blonde. "But let's tend to business. Do you know this egg?"

Ralph Oliver preserved a dignified silence.

The first detective said, "Policewoman Sally Murphy, permit me to introduce your worthy colleague, Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver."

"Turn him loose," advised his partner.

"The sergeant is no masher. He hates women. The can is full of nice little girls who only tried to support their poor little mothers and buy medicine for their little crippled brothers, and all because of Sergeant Oliver's hard heart."

"Just be sure that you remember the 'sergeant' part of that speech, Craddock," said Oliver.

"Turn him loose, Sally," Craddock said. "We're collecting an audience. Sergeant Oliver's many friends in the district can't be trusted when he's chained up this way."

He turned and glared around at the small crowd which had quietly collected.

"Back to your holes," he ordered. "Move on. Police school is over for tonight. Beat it."

Craddock's more cautious partner thought an apology was in order. "Sorry you walked into our stake-out, Sergeant," he said. "Louses things up for us, too, you know."

"Why wasn't I told you planned a stake-out here tonight?" demanded Oliver.

"You're not on duty tonight," Craddock reminded him. "All the guys on the beat were posted."

"Maybe Sergeant Oliver makes a hobby of these little pick-ups," suggested Sally Murphy. "You know, one for me and one for the city jail. I say let's run him in."

"Naw, not a chance," said Craddock. "He don't pick 'em up for himself. Didn't we tell you he hates women?"

It was a dreary, rainy morning. The sort of morning that fitted the mood of the interior decorating of Police Headquarters. But Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver paid no heed to the familiar ugliness of his surroundings.

As he opened the door of the squad room, there was a sudden hush; but he'd caught the tag-end of laughter and the words "... cuffed neat and tight to the railing ..."

Elderly, battered Sergeant Edward Duffy threw himself gallantly into the breach of silence.

"You don't change to your uniform today, Ralph," he said. "You're posted to report to Lieutenant Corcoran for plain-clothes assignment. My hearty congratulations."

There was a low-throated rumble of half-articulated congratulations from the officers lounging around in the room.

Wordlessly, Ralph Oliver shut the door again and strode off down the oak-paneled corridor to Lieutenant Corcoran's office.

Emmett Corcoran was young for his rank, and looked even younger than he was. Short of an untimely bullet, unlikely in a headquarters office, Lieutenant Corcoran would long remain an obstacle to further promotion for Ralph Oliver. This was only one, and not the most important, reason for their mutual dislike.

"Ah, it's you," said Lieutenant Corcoran, lifting his gaze from a stack of reports. "You're being shifted to plainclothes, Oliver. Some scheme cooked up by the Old Man. You're supposed to see him."

"Then what am I doing here?" queried Oliver.

"I just wanted you on the carpet for a minute on all that gun-play in that flat over on Fitzsimmons Avenue last week."

"One of them went for a gun," Oliver said quietly.

"He says cigarettes. Didn't have a gun, as a matter of fact."

"He's been arrested often enough to know he shouldn't reach inside his coat during a pinch," Oliver countered.

"I might take that as an excuse from anyone else," admitted the lieutenant. "But from you, Oliver—uh-uhh. You're too free with that service pistol."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver, realizing the futility of arguing.

"That's one of the reasons I recommended you for this plainclothes job," pursued the lieutenant. "It might give that hot rod of yours a chance to cool."

"I was wondering how come," admitted Oliver.

"That will be all," said the lieutenant curtly. "It might keep you out of mischief on your night off, too," he added meaningfully. "You won't be looking for any unpaid overtime."

Police-Captain Patrick Murphy was the only senior officer privileged to wear plainclothes who habitually wore a uniform. He said he didn't feel like a policeman otherwise, and feeling like a policeman seemed to be his whole aim in life.

"Sit down, Sergeant," Captain Murphy said. "Lieutenant Corcoran tells me that you're just the man to deal with all these brats who've suddenly turned hophead."

"Who, sir?" said Sergeant Oliver, bewildered by the captain's characteristic way of cutting directly to the heart of the matter.

"These brats who've begun monkeying around with heroin, cocaine, marihuana—the works," the captain said impatiently. "The press, City Hall and every civic group

in town is raising the roof about it. Those little guys are the hardest to catch, but it's up to us to do it somehow."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver.

"Now this doesn't call for any fancy gun-play," continued the captain. "In fact, you'll be working with a policewoman. A new one. Very smart. College education. Name's Sally Murphy."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver glumly. "I know her. If anyone will pass as one of these hopped-up juvenile delinquents, she will."

"The fact that her name is Murphy is not a mere coincidence," said the captain grimly. "She's my daughter. I want her exposed to no rough stuff. You'll answer to me personally for anything that goes amiss with her."

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know—"

"That'll be all," cut in the captain. "You're entitled to your opinion; but I'd be careful of giving it out in front of Lieutenant Corcoran. A girl's boyfriend isn't likely to be as broad-minded as her father."

The captain reached into a drawer of his desk and drew out a fat file folder. "Here's all the data we have on the ring we think is playing around with this penny-ante game of supplying the stuff to punks. A lot of it you already know. But there's some stuff here from the reports of the men regularly assigned to narcotics control. Policewoman Murphy's already seen it. Take today to go through this and discuss it with her. Dismissed."

I'm in the police dog-house for sure now, thought Sergeant Ralph Oliver as he folded his tall, angular frame into a chair behind a vacant desk in an office bay. Who'd have guessed she was the Old Man's kid? Who ever heard of an Irish blonde, anyhow?

This job, he knew, was a form of exile. The regular narcotics men had much bigger fish to fry; and only the publicity-seekers with their instinct for lurid, televised investigations had forced special attention to focus on this one minor segment of the real, and continuous, police job of narcotics control. The public would lose interest in a few weeks, and he'd still be pounding a beat on the fringe of the real problem.

"You look like Calvin examining the manifesto of a new heresy," said a voice at his shoulder. He knew without looking that it was Sally Murphy. It had a husky timbre to it. It fitted the face and the figure and the hair. And none of them fitted into the pattern of college girl, police captain's daughter, nice girl.

"Calvin who?"

"He was a guy who was against sin," she said. "Your face looks as if it had just been chipped out of solid granite. What's the matter? Going to be a sorehead just because you'd rather play with guns than girls? Act your age."

"My age? Maybe you're right. Half of my age has been spent being a cop. So maybe I am only half as old as I look. My growth's been stunted."

"What's wrong with being a cop?" she countered. "I come from a long line of cops."

"Nobody loves a cop," he said sourly. "You'll find that out darn quick."

"My mother does," she countered. "But I suppose that, on the whole, you're right. All the more reason why we cops should love one another. You could start with me."

"You stick to Corcoran," he said gruffly. "A girl who looks like you is a vice condition. I can't get my mind off my work when you're around."

She laughed, and if her voice sounded like a brook it must have been one with very deep water.

"Aw, just because I handcuffed you to a railing," she said, mock-pleadingly. "But, after all, what's a girl to do with a guy like you if you go around thinking the worst of every girl you meet?"

"I'm not often wrong," he replied. "But let's get to work. You agree with me that Russ Antovil is peddling this stuff to the smart younger crowd?"

"Obviously. Who else is going to bother with the risk of all those small transactions?"

"Well, I'll pick you up at your place at, say, eight o'clock and we'll go get him."

"Just like that," she said. "Like making a date for the movies. Do you know where he is?"

"Naturally. The narcotics boys are going to be sore when we take him out of circulation. They've been trying to trace the source of supply through him. But we've got a priority to mess things up for them."

"Well, we do need a list of his customers to work on, but . . ."

"What do you mean, a list of customers?" he queried.

"Why, for rehabilitation work, of course," she replied. "It's preventative police work. We can't just let all those little addicts run around loose. They'll find another source of supply."

"What?" he exploded. "I'm supposed to go around holding hands with a bunch of

half-baked hopheads and try to lead them back to sweetness and light? I won't do it. I'm a cop, not a ward orderly."

"Look, egg," she said, patiently explaining. "What good does it do to cut off supply? You've got to hit at the demand and eliminate *that*. As long as there's a demand for anything, backed up with money, a supply will be found."

"Maybe, maybe," he dismissed the argument. "But that's not police work. That's social service. That's work for some scared, inhibited dame in a clinic."

"Well," she said with finality, "I'm not scared or inhibited, but I do have a degree in social service work. What's more, I'm a cop; and the boss has ordered this new approach."

"The boss," scoffed Sergeant Oliver.

"Don't forget he's a captain, even if he is my father," she reminded him tartly.

"That's a deal," he said. "I won't forget that your father's a captain, if you'll kindly remember in the future that I am a sergeant."

"Oh, those poor, mixed-up kids," was all she said in reply.

In an unmarked police car parked outside the Pennyland Arcade, Sally Murphy awaited the return of Ralph Oliver and prisoner. She hadn't long to wait, but the sergeant came back without Russ Antovil.

"He wasn't there," explained Ralph, sliding in behind the wheel. "Wait till I get my hands on that stooly! Giving me a bum steer."

"Does Antovil know you by sight?" queried Sally.

"Sure. They all do. That's why it's so silly to assign me to undercover work."

"Then that explains the man who came out of there a few minutes ago wearing one of those comic nose-mustache-glasses things they sell at carnivals and places like Pennyland."

"What!" he exploded. "He couldn't do that. Nobody'd attract attention to himself by wearing one of those things out on the street."

"I'll bet Antovil would," she said. Especially if he saw you mousing around in there in civilian clothes. He knows you wouldn't be going to a place like Pennyland for your own amusement."

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned. "I'll never live this one down. Never. If he gets the idea we're actually going to put the arm on him, he'll go underground so far he'll come up wearing a pig-tail."

"His wife will know where he is," she reassured him. "And you know I'm not going to tell anyone how he walked right by you wearing an outrageous disguise like that."

"Well, that's something," he said grudgingly. "But as for getting anything out of his wife, not a chance. She's legally his wife, for one thing, and so she can't be compelled to squeal on him. For another, she's in this with him."

"The radiophone just told me that Smiley and Crothers picked her up at her apartment," she pointed out. "A bird in the hand, you know."

"Yeah, but a bird that never learned how to sing. A real tough bird."

"Women don't get that tough, Buster," she told him. "Mrs. Antovil may not love cops; but she does love someone. That's always a good place to start when you're dealing with a woman."

Resignedly, Sergeant Oliver started the police car and eased it out into the traffic.

Under the hard white glare of a drop-light, Bunny Antovil sat calmly, even insolently, and smoked a cigarette. The cigarette was in a long, white holder which would have betrayed the slightest tremor of her hand, had there been any.

By contrast with her sleek, brunette elegance and self-possession, Sergeant Oliver and two Narcotics Squad detectives seemed grubby peasants fresh from cleaning stables. Coats off, ties awry and mopping at perspiration-beaded foreheads, they stood in a semicircle in the attitude of petitioners before the throne.

"Mr. Antovil is not in the habit of confiding the details of his business to me," she said loftily. "And as for his present whereabouts, I am not and never have been a possessive wife. He has no doubt been called away on business."

"Don't hand me that hoity-toity guff," growled Oliver. "You know me, Bunny; and I know you. I know who you are, where you come from, and how you got to be where you are now."

"A girl can change a lot in twenty years," she said, for the first time sounding a little on the defensive.

"A girl, yeah," agreed Oliver. "But you didn't change while you were still a girl. Now stop horsing around and tell us where Russ is hiding out and maybe we'll give you a break."

"Look, copper," she said in a hard, flat voice, "you've been at this for three hours.

Where is it getting you? You know I don't have to talk. If you're going to pin a separate rap on me, well, pin it and get it over with. But stop pestering me about Russ."

"Dropped the Park Avenue pose," noted Oliver. "Well, that's some relief."

"I don't get this," she said almost plaintively. "If you got something, why don't you use it? You guys are always full of ideas, but short on proof."

"This is an idea you wouldn't understand," said Oliver. "This idea is going to stop girls like you from growing up to be women like you. We want Russ. Where is he?"

"You must be nuts," she said.

Sally Murphy, her ear shamelessly pressed against the panel of the interrogation room door, almost laughed aloud when she heard Ralph Oliver espousing the cause of "preventive police work" as if he had invented it personally years ago. Just like a man! Give you a big argument and scoff at your ideas, and then turn right around and pass off those ideas as his own.

Reflecting thus, Sally decided that it was time she went in and gave Ralph Oliver a lesson in the elements of feminine psychology. He needed his sleep.

The heavy oak door of the interrogation room burst open with a bang, and the ornate brass knob bruised a chunk of plaster from the wall. A raging, disheveled blonde ran in clutching at the torn shoulder of a blouse.

"Where is she?" demanded Sally. "Where's the filthy bag who claims to be his wife? Those monkey's sons out there claim you—"

"What is this, Sally?" said Sergeant Oliver wearily. "Now cut out this horseplay and get out of here. Beat it."

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Sally furiously. "I have my rights, even if we're not married yet; and nobody, not even you lousy coppers, is going to pull anything behind Russ's back. Not while I'm here!"

Bunny Antovil fought back the burning tide of blood as it rushed to her cheeks. She struggled for control. This was not the time and place for it. But she knew that the girl must be speaking the truth. She was the type Russ went for, and there'd been a lot of them just like her before. But Russ had always frankly told them, all of them, that he was married. It had never gone this ominously far before.

"You cheap bottle blonde!" Bunny heard

herself say. "I am his wife. And that's more than you'll ever be."

"Yeah?" sneered Sally. "Just you go ask him, if you don't believe me."

Bunny knew in her heart that it must be true. Why else would the cops be holding this hussy if they didn't have a good notion she knew where Russ was holed up?

She abandoned the fight for control. She luxuriated in the release of her feelings. She told the girl off. She told the three policemen off. And before she was through, her rampage spent, she'd told them where Russ could be found.

"All right, you tramp," she mouthed. "Go get him! You can have him and welcome! I've done his dirt for sixteen years, and all I get for it is one frowsy blonde after another flung in my face. Go ahead, take him! I don't want him! I don't want to see him again!"

Bunny Antovil looked ten years older when the matron came to take her back down to the cell block. Sergeant Ralph Oliver wearily straightened his tie and replaced his coat.

"Who'd ever have believed it?" he marveled. "Bunny Antovil, of all people!"

"I feel terribly mean, though," said Sally contritely. "It was a shame to play her for a sucker that way. After all, there's something pretty wonderful about love . . . no matter whose, or for whom."

"Forget it," Oliver said briskly. "She had it coming. She's lived off the fat of the land for years by making suckers out of brainless kids. Let's go get Russ."

He reached inside his coat and slipped his service revolver out of the spring clip that held it under his armpit.

"Here," he said. "You take care of this for me. Put it in your purse. In the future you'll do the deciding when to pull a gun play. I'm beginning to think that your way of playing cops-and-robbers gets more results."

"Thanks," she replied, thrusting back the hand that proffered the heavy pistol. "But there isn't room in a tiny little handbag like this one for two of those things."

"Oh," he said.

"Sure, Buster," she said, wrinkling her nose at him. "I'm a cop, see? So's my old man. So's my ex-boy friend. And so's my new one."

"I guess nobody but us cops loves a cop," said Sergeant Oliver. "You know, I'm even beginning to like poor Lieutenant Corcoran."

WHEN THE DEVIL-GOD SMILED

Gripping Mystery Novelette

By JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

That lifeless bit of wood, carved into the sinister likeness of a heathen devil-god, obviously could know nothing of Creedy's blonde wife. Yet why did it keep grinning and nodding, grinning and nodding, as if it knew a secret too awful to tell?

CHAPTER ONE.

A GIFT FOR MADELEINE.

HERBERT CREEDY found his Park Avenue apartment deserted, windows closed in the summer heat, filmy dust over everything. Madeleine's picture stood on the piano in the living room, blue-eyed and smiling, with golden hair and wistful mouth, mocking him with its tender, dreamy look. She was not there herself, however, though he called her name once or twice automatically.

He had arrived home in New York this morning, weeks ahead of schedule, after catching an Army bomber back from Tulagi unexpectedly and getting an airline seat from San Pedro to LaGuardia Field. He had finished his special assignment some time ago—a series of Korean battle films—and had been wandering around the Solomons ever since. He had rather liked the idea of taking some extra films there, as sort of an aftermath of World War II. But he was glad now he'd gotten the chance for that plane ride home.

He took his kitbag into the bedroom and dropped it on his bed. Looking in her closet, he saw that there were a number of empty dress hangers on the rod, and that the morocco traveling bag he had given her last Christmas was missing from the top closet shelf, and perhaps a hatbox or some other bag. Her jewel case, which she ordinarily kept in their deposit vault at the bank, was standing on her bureau with its lid open, empty.

There was no particular reason why he should have expected to find her home, since she hadn't known that he was returning. Still, he felt a little disconsolate. He had pictured this moment of reunion all the way across the Pacific—Madeleine's look of incredulity as he appeared in the doorway, then her gay little trill of joy as she rushed into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, I can't BELIEVE it's you! Oh, darling, you look WONDERFUL!"

He was a phlegmatic man, Herbert Creedy: heavy-faced, stolid and middle-aged, with a small judicious mouth and small inexpressive eyes; he did not look at all sentimental. Still, he was. This was a disappointment.

She had no family whom she might be visiting, and no friends with summer places where she might have gone. She had few intimate friends. She liked New York, too. The country or seashore had bored her and made her restless before very long, whenever they had gone away together.

But it was futile to speculate where she had gone, or how long she might be away.

She wasn't here, that was all.

Removing his cap and tunic, Herbert began to unpack his bag, throwing most of the contents out onto the floor in a mildewed heap. At the bottom he found the carved black devil-god, and set it upright on Madeleine's spinet desk, beside the phone, where it swayed like a drunken totem pole.

"Here you are, Oscar," he said, with a smile at its menacing look. "America country belong me, belong you now.

Sorry Mary fellow belong me no stop. I give you to her when I see her."

Its name wasn't Oscar, of course. It was something like Esoboro, the Crocodile God, at a guess; one of the boys on Tulagi who made a pretense of knowing something about such things had told him that. It was about ten inches high, and made of some very dark, hard wood, which at times seemed extraordinarily heavy—although when he had tested it in water, he had found that it would float.

It was carved in the shape of a man sitting with his legs crossed underneath him. Its head, which occupied about half its length, was long and pointed, with deep pits of eyes, a corrugated forehead, flat nostrils, and rows of pointed teeth in a curled and sneering mouth. Its tiny arms were folded across its narrow chest. Its buttocks and crossed legs were disproportionately heavy, its thighs and ankles intertwining, forming a kind of rounded base on which it rested, like those celluloid toys with round, weighted bases which are called teeter-totters. Its balance, though, was not so perfect as a toy's. Any slight irregularity of surface, or at times a breath of air too small to be perceptible, would set it to rocking meditatively.

He had picked it up on Vella Lavella. On a northwest corner of the island where the PT boat in which he and his cameraman were riding down to Tulagi had put in for minor repairs. Finding a trail going in from the jungle shore, he had ventured up it to stretch his legs.

A dark and steaming path, sprawling up over slippery ground among the roots of the giant trees, with the screaming of unseen parakeets and the horrible cut-throat gurgling of the lizards all about him. A quarter or a half mile up, the path had ended at the ashes of a burned native house, covering a twenty-foot circular space in the jungle.

The fire had happened some time ago. The charred smell had evaporated, and jungle vines and grasses had already begun to grow riotously over the blackened ground. There was a human skeleton lying at the edge of the burned place, with an arm stretched out toward the center of it, and its skull split down the back. But whether the skeleton of a native or not, or even man or woman, he wasn't anthropologist enough to know.

It had been a tambu house, probably,

he thought, because of its secluded location and its size. Ten feet in from the edge of the burned ground, following the direction of the skeleton's outstretched arm, he had seen the little god upon the ground.

It was nodding. Its sinister smile was on him. He had stepped towards it.

The fire which had consumed the house had left no marks upon it, unless part of its blackness was due to fire. It had felt surprisingly heavy for its size when he had picked it up.

It had obviously been abandoned or forgotten here for some weeks, and perhaps months. Whoever owned it might be dead. Still, Herbert had a highly-developed sense of property rights. Upon reflection, he had pulled out his purse and notebook. Extracting a ten-dollar bill, he had written on a page of the book:

To whom it may concern:

Am taking god as souvenir, and leaving bill in payment. Trust is satisfactory.

*H. Creedy, Major, AUS
Battle Films Records
Special Service Div.*

(Temporary)

That was simple enough. Anybody could understand it, who could read. He looked for a place to leave the note and money. The best place seemed to be beneath the outstretched hand-bones of the skeleton, where they might be visible, yet not drift away. Squatting, he slid them, neatly folded together lengthwise, beneath the dead man's bony fingers. He stood up, with the idol in his hand, feeling that he had completed a transaction.

"Now you belong to me," he told it.

He had heard no step behind him, but something had made him glance over his shoulder. There was a native in a lava-lava standing motionless just behind him, with white-limed hair like sugar frosting, and white lime streaks painted on his face. His hands were behind his back.

For a long moment he had stood looking over his shoulder. The devil-god in his hand seemed to have grown terrifically heavy.

"What name belong you, big fellow?" he managed to articulate, slowly heeling around. "What thing belong hand belong you?"

The black man grinned, without reply.

Then, suddenly, his face contorted as Herbert turned to face him. He stared at the thing in Herbert's hand with gaping mouth and expanding eyeballs. With a wild

screech, he seemed to leap six feet backwards. He turned and fled like a shadow among the trees, flinging out his hidden right hand, with a sharp-edged bolo in it.

The parakeets and lizards stopped a moment, and then resumed their screaming and gurgling. Herbert stood, gripping the devil-god, a little shaky yet. When strength was back in his knees, he went hurrying and sliding back down the slippery trail to the beach.

The PT boys had laughed at him when he narrated the incident of the sinister native with the hidden bolo. They all carried bolos as a farmer carried a jackknife or a mechanic carries a screwdriver. They all whitened their hair and painted streaks on their faces, too. The guy had probably been a deacon of the church, who had been terrified out of his wits by Major Creedy's own look of menace, thinking the major was going to attack him.

"The fact is, Major, I'd be scared myself if I saw you glaring at me," said the cocky young skipper with a grin. "You just have that kind of a face."

The skipper had admired the little carved idol, though, and had offered five dollars for it. When Herbert told him he had left twice that much in payment for it, the skipper said that he had paid plenty. A native could live the rest of his life on ten dollars, and send all his sons to college. He could always carve himself another devil-god.

He had brought it back to give to Madeleine. She had come into his mind at once when he had seen the thing nodding among the ashes, with its malignant grin. She had a childish pleasure in fantastic and weird things which had often amused him, with his realistic mind.

He remembered how at times she would tell him, when she came hurrying in a little late for dinner, that she had been at the Museum of Natural History over across Central Park again, spellbound among the vast cases of devil masks and demon gods, assembled there from all over the world. She would talk about them, breathlessly and with little shivers, as she hurried to get dinner together.

"They actually stare at you, Herbert! I saw their eyes MOVE! They were LOOKING right at me!"

"Soup again, witch?" he would say patiently, watching the labels on the cans she was opening to put on the stove, and

feeling his stomach turn over a little inside him. "How about going out to eat this evening?"

"Oh, Herbert, you don't think I'm a good cook!"

"Sure," he would say. "Sure, you're wonderful. But let's go out tonight to some swell joint and make a party of it. You can tell me all about those funny faces at the museum and how they looked at you, without having to think of the dishes afterwards. If they did look at you, who can blame them? Your own fault for being so beautiful, witch."

"Witch" was the name he had always had for her. Bewitching was the word for Madeleine.

She had never been a good cook, though, God bless her. The domestic arts were beyond her dreamy mind. That had not prevented her from having fits of trying to be the efficient little housewife, preparing delicacies for her man, as domestic as hell. And he had suffered accordingly—until Dr. Burghwaite had put him on a special diet that last time, and insisted that he eat only in first-class restaurants thenceforth, otherwise he might not last long. . . .

He had actually taken the prognosis of the young medical fool seriously, and had been alarmed about himself. Which showed how much doctors really knew. The things he had eaten during these past months overseas! Some of it would have turned the stomach of a turtle. Yet his indigestion had completely cured itself. He had never felt better in his life.

He would like to have Madeleine see him, so healthy and strong. She would be amazed and delighted by the improvement in him. But there was no way of knowing where she had gone, or how to go about finding her.

The little black demon was continuing to nod enigmatically. Its look of smug omniscience was a little too much to bear. He put his hand on it a moment to stop its wobbling. But when he took his hand away, it began again.

"All right, Oscar," he said, as he took off his tie. "If you know so damned much, spill it. You savvy where Mary fellow belong me? Mary fellow with gold hair, her picture in other room on box-you-pound-him-he-cry? Let's see you do your stuff, Oscar."

It was ridiculous. Only a damned carved wooden thing. Still, as he watched it, the

little black demon was nodding, it seemed to him, rather definitely and emphatically toward the window beside the desk.

The window opened out on a court of the apartment building, facing the identical window of the apartment across the hall. As he looked out, he saw a woman standing at the window opposite. She was hoisting the shade to the top, with a flabby white arm lifted—a fat, gray-haired woman in a flowered house-dress, with a fat, good-natured face. Having raised the shade, she turned and waddled off.

He remembered who she was—a Mrs. Blennerhassett, the wife of a regular Army colonel, who had moved into the apartment across the hall with two poodles a month or two before he had been ordered to Korea. He had seen her in the elevator or hallway once or twice—a good old sport, painted and frizzed and dressed like gay sixteen, with fat hands covered with diamonds, and a roguish, hilarious eye. Fifty year old if she was a day, and not letting it worry her. She had seemed to like the company of young people, he remembered—had always been having a young crowd in for cocktail parties, perhaps her nieces or nephews and their friends.

Madeleine had rather an aversion to making women friends, ordinarily. She liked to go alone to the museums and art galleries, the movies and other things. She didn't care for afternoon bridge, which most women were always playing. He remembered, however, that she had struck up something of a friendship with Mrs. Blennerhassett, and had mentioned a few times having spent the afternoon with her.

Perhaps Mrs. Blennerhassett might know where she had gone. Perhaps, even—the thought suddenly struck him—she had moved across the hall to stay with the old girl, so they could keep each other company. She might actually be over there now. . . .

Rebbuttoning his shirt, he went out to Mrs. Blennerhassett's door across the hall and rang the bell, half-expecting Madeleine to appear in person.

But it was only the old girl who opened the door, her billowing featherbed bulk uncorseted in her flowered housedress, her fat amiable face unpainted and shiny at this hour of the morning, her gray hair in steel curlers. She looked at him good-humoredly but blankly, while her poodles beside her sniffed across the threshold toward his knees.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for my wife," he explained. "I'm Major Creedy. Mr. Creedy, from across the hall. I just got back, and find she's away. I wondered if she told you where she was going?"

"The little lady across the hall?" she said placidly. "I thought she was a widow. No, I don't know where she is. I'm sorry. I didn't know she was away. You're looking for my sister, Mrs. Blennerhassett, I expect. She's gone away for the summer. I'm Mrs. Horkins, her baby sister, from Perth Amboy. She asked me to stay in the apartment to take care of the doggies for her."

"Then you don't know where she's gone?" he repeated.

"Emily? Oh, you mean your wife. No, I've never really met her. I don't know a thing about her. Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, I can't just now," he said. "Sorry."

She smiled at him amiably, with her fat vacuous face, as he made his apologies and withdrew.

"You aren't so very bright, Oscar," he told the little demon when he got back to his bedroom.

He had been an idiot to act as if its swaying head might have meant anything. It didn't know where she was any more than a doorknob. Of course, he hadn't really supposed that it might know. . . .

CHAPTER TWO.

WHERE THE DEVIL-GOD LEADS.

THEN he suddenly realized that it wasn't nodding at the window, after all. Rather, it seemed obvious as he observed it that it was nodding at something beside it on the desk. Indicating the telephone, perhaps.

It didn't mean a thing. But he was reminded that he should call up his office and let his secretary, Grace Meadows, know that he was back. She might know where Madeleine had gone.

He picked up the phone, called her.

"It's Major Creedy, Grace. Mr. Creedy. I just got in."

"Oh, Mr. Creedy!" she exclaimed, and her cool impersonal voice warmed for a moment. "This *is* a pleasant surprise! I've had all sorts of nightmares about something happening to you. Quite silly of me, of course. Are you all through now—back

for good? I feel like celebrating. I'll have to go out and splurge myself to a double chocolate soda, or something like that."

"How have things been going, Grace?"

"Very well, Mr. Creedy. Or Major, as I suppose I'll have to call you from now on. 'One Man's Poison' is still playing to standing room only. 'You Slay Me' opens next week. Lieber feels that you did a wonderful job with it, and that it's bound to be a hit, too."

"Good," he said.

"You came back just in time," she told him. "Sam Lewis has just sent in three mystery scripts, and there's another batch from the Associated Producers in this morning's mail. They must have both forgotten you were away. They ask for a quick word, if you would care to take any of them. I was going to see if I could cable you."

"I'll be in after lunch and look them over," he told her. "By the way, do you happen to know where that little witch of mine is? She seems to have gone somewhere."

"Mrs. Creedy?" she said, her tone aloof and cool. "No, I haven't seen anything of her. She did call up last week, asking me to send her next month's household check in advance. But she didn't say anything to me about going anywhere. Tomorrow is your wedding anniversary, by the way, Mr. Creedy. I have it on my calendar. You wanted me to order flowers."

"Yes, I know," he said a little heavily. "That was why I stretched it to make it back. But she isn't here. Well, that's that. Never mind the flowers now. I'll take care of them myself when I've found her. Thanks. I'll probably be in by two o'clock."

So Grace didn't know where she was, either. Strike two for Oscar, he thought, hanging up.

The swaying little demon had worked over, in its teetering, toward the desk edge. As if it hadn't been the phone that it had meant at all, but something else that it was trying to bring to his attention. Of course it was crazy . . .

He picked up the three or four envelopes lying on the desk. The first-of-the-month light and phone bills, still unopened. An empty lilac-tinted envelope addressed to Madeleine in deep purple ink, in a small rounded hand, and smelling of lilac perfume. A circular letter from the Children's Charity addressed to him. His

last letter to Madeleine written from Tulagi before he knew he would be home so soon.

He put the opened bills and the charity appeal to one side, and dropped the envelopes, together with his own letter, into the wastebasket beside the desk, while the little demon on the desk rocked more violently.

There was nothing else on the desk except the blotter. He lifted it, but the space beneath it was bare. Still there was a feeling tingling ridiculously down in his spine, like in a childhood game, that he was getting hot.

He jerked open the doors of the two cubbyhole compartments at the back of the little desk, with some force. But there was only a bottle of ink in one, and in the other a melange of pins and pen-points and rubber bands, bits of string, some last year's Christmas seals, a half-filled paper packet labeled *Rat Poison*, and a little horse-chestnut figure with a comical clamshell face and stick limbs.

He recognized it, with a smile of sentimental memory. The little funny-face which he had bought for Madeleine at the Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe in Quahaug when they had been at The Breakers on their honeymoon. He remembered how childishly pleased she had been with it, the sparkle in her eyes, her exclamatory laughter.

"Why, it is positively DEAR! It DOES look so dreadfully comical! I am going to name it HERBERT!"

He hadn't known that she had it still. He took it out and looked it over, smiling. It did have his face, somewhat, when one looked for the resemblance, with the small pursed mouth, the small eyes, and the clam-shaped heavy jowls.

There was a pin stuck through the center of its small horse-chestnut body, for no good reason that he could see. He pulled it out with his fingernail. Inside, the nut was only green fusty dust. He dropped it into the wastebasket, along with the bits of string, the rat bait, and the old Christmas seals.

"Well, Oscar—"

The teetering little demon fell over, and plunged headlong down into the wastebasket.

He bent and lifted it out. On the bottom of the basket, beneath the envelopes and debris which he had thrown away, he saw a glossy, large-sized booklet, an advertise-

ment of some sort. It had become wedged against the basket's sides, as such large flat booklets sometimes do, and had remained on the bottom when the basket had last been dumped out.

He read: *The Breakers*.

He set the little demon back on the desk, and fished the booklet out.

That must be the answer to her whereabouts now. It was so obvious, if it had only occurred to him. She had gone back up there to the Cape to spend their anniversary alone. A place where she could feel herself nearest in thought and remembrance to him on that day, thought separated physically by the greatest distance possible on earth.

He realized how little he had really known her, with all her seemingly light and transparent nature. A man may love and live with a woman, and still not know her. The date, the place had meant no less to her than to him.

Enclosed between the glossy leaves of the booklet, when he opened it, he found a letter from *The Breakers* that answered all his questions.

Dear Madam:

Replying to your inquiry of recent date, our rates for single room and bath, American plan, are from \$9.00 to \$14.50 per day, depending on location, etc., with ten per cent reduction by the week.

Trusting to be able to make reservation for you, we remain. . . .

The little demon sat motionless, surveying him with its carved crocodile smile.

"You win, Oscar," he said. "You all time smart fella."

He forced a laugh. The reason it had been nodding before, of course, was because the desk surface where he had first placed it had been imperceptibly not quite level. The reason it had stopped nodding, with its smug look now, was because the spot where he had replanted it was geometrically plane. Naturally. There was nothing in its head.

So purely by accident he had learned that Madeleine was at *The Breakers*.

It would have spoiled it if he'd phoned her, asking her to return. The only thing was to join her there, continuing the surprise. Calling up Grand Central, he learned that the daily Chicopee express left at 11:09, in little more than an hour. No reservations available on it, but he could take his chances of getting a seat in a coach.

He packed the little demon for Madeleine into his weekend bag, together with slacks,

swim trunks, and other beach vacation accessories, and took a cab to his office, a block from Grand Central, to pick up the scripts from Associated and Sam Lewis. The office was closed. Grace had gone out to celebrate his return, no doubt, with her double chocolate soda. He could not wait for her. He filled his brief-case with the play-scripts and left a note for her, telling her that he had been in and taken them, and would be in again with a report on them not later than next Monday.

He expected to arrive around six or seven, in time for dinner with Madeleine. Perhaps they'd have a bottle of champagne to celebrate his return, and he'd make an amusing ceremony of presenting the little demon to her.

His train from New York was delayed, however, by a freight derailment on the line; following which the last bus from Chicopee to Quahaug Beach broke down along a lonely stretch of the salt marshes—marooning him, the only passenger, for hours in the night mist, while the hatchet-faced driver tried to shore up the broken rear-end with various ill-assorted pieces of driftwood, before finally walking back miles to find a phone.

As a last straw, when the replacement bus which was ultimately sent brought him into Quahaug around midnight, he found the village dead and dark, with a five-mile taxi drive ahead of him out to the inn. The Cape still went to bed at ten o'clock, it seemed, with a profound and vegetative slumber, as it had when Madeleine and he had spent their honeymoon at *The Breakers* six years ago.

Standing on the dark, narrow street in front of the post office where the rickety little bus had debarked him, he watched it skittering back up the road, half regretting that he had not stayed on it. He might have found some accommodation in Chicopee for the night, getting down to the business of the work in his briefcase, and finishing the trip in the morning. Madeleine would be asleep when he reached *The Breakers* now, anyhow. However, the tail-lights of the bus were receding, and it was too late for that.

Across the street from him there stood the silver-shingled, ramshackle old movie hall, with the Quahaug Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe next to it, and a dim light in the front office of the taxi-garage a few doors down. Carrying his bags, he crossed toward it.

The old movie shed had a sign above it, *Fish Pier Theater*. In the glass case in front

there was a crudely lettered poster announcing some forthcoming amateur play called "Horror"—and probably well named. He was reminded that in the past two or three seasons Quahaug had become something of an amateur theatrical colony, a Mecca for budding poetic playwrights and other would-be dramatic geniuses. He had a professional's discomfort and dread at the thought of amateurs. He would do well to avoid them, if any were at The Breakers.

The Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe window contained its remembered tall glass urns, filled with red and blue water, flanking an assortment of clamshell necklaces and other souvenir novelties for the tourist trade.

The shell necklaces and little figures were primitive enough to have come from the Solomons themselves, he thought, though even more crudely done. They showed the link among people throughout the world. There is something of the primitive and simple savage hidden in even the most civilized men, he reflected. Even in himself, perhaps, to some remote degree.

Voodoo and medicine—they were well allied in the window that way. Those big jars of colored water typified the mumbo-jumbo which still surrounds the medicine man's profession, he thought. He had been off doctors ever since young Dr. Burghwaite had told him portentously, more than a year ago, that he would probably die in a short time of gastroenteritis, unless he watched himself carefully. Now, after six months of the hardest kind of living in Korea and the islands of South Pacific, he felt infinitely more fit than when he had left.

He passed on from the drugstore to the taxi-garage. The door was padlocked, and there was no one in the office. Only a night-light burning inside, above the office safe.

Except for that one light, the village was absolutely dark. There were no translucent signs advertising tourist homes and no other taxi places, nor any way to locate a driver and arouse him.

There was nothing to do but to set out to walk it to The Breakers, along the dark sandy road, beside the monotonous slap and hiss of the night ocean, past fog-veiled pine woods and beach-plum thickets, with the infrequent summer cottages that he passed looming vague and dark, and his bags growing heavier with every step.

An ungodly hour to be arriving. He would miss Madeleine's look of dreamy blank surprise, the sudden little trill of recognizing

rapture as he appeared in the door. He would lose out on the humorous ceremony of presenting the little demon. The champagne which they would have drunk together would not now be drunk. Not in the same way, nor at that time. She had been long asleep by now. It would have been better if he stayed over in Chicopee until morning.

The inn's low-spreading wings were dark, looming solitary on the dune edge overlooking the sucking ocean. He passed the beach-plum thicket at the edge of Rotten Bottom marsh, and was on the inn grounds. Only a dim light showed from the downstairs lobby as he went up the drive.

A station-wagon, lettered *The Breakers*, was parked in front of the veranda steps, with its luggage tailboard down. For the transportation of guests, probably, to and from the bus terminus in the village. If he had known of it, he might have phoned from Quahaug.

His bag felt like two hundred pounds. For the moment it did not seem to him that he could carry it the last few feet up the steps, not possibly, after carrying it so far. He set it down to change arms again,

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as he had done periodically during the long walk.

One of the snaps had sprung open. He closed it, and the other one sprang open. He closed them together, firmly. He picked bag and briefcase up again, and carried them up the steps and in.

The cozy lobby, with its flowered wallpaper, broadloom carpet, and chintz divans, had only a couple of lights lit in it as he shouldered in. A pewter wall-bracket glowed just inside the door at his right hand; the only other light was a gooseneck lamp on the white desk-counter across the room.

In the fireplace a wisp of smoke wafted straight up, motionless and pencil-thin, from a foot-deep pile of wood ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants in their china jardinières looked dead. A green-and-yellow parrot sat chained on its perch at the foot of the green-carpeted staircase, with its head beneath its wing. There was a dim bulb lit above the landing turn of the staircase.

Two or three bags were stacked at the left side of the door, a morocco bag and a couple of striped linen ones, with cardboard tags tied to their handles—luggage of some of last evening's arrivals which had not yet been carried to their rooms, or of some of tomorrow morning's early departures which had been brought down in readiness to carry out. He set his own bag down inside the door, on the right-hand side.

Behind the desk an ancient clerk sat sleeping on his stool, his withered bald head resting on the register, beneath the gooseneck lamp. His veined hands twitched like sleeping salamanders on the counter beside his head. His breath gurgled as he slept.

"Good evening," Herbert said, standing at the desk.

There was a little nicked push-bell on the counter. After a moment of waiting, he pressed it. The old man lifted his head with a jerk, with a blink and shake of his blurred watery eyes.

"Hey?" he said.

"Good evening," Herbert repeated.

"Have you a—"

He had been going to ask, "Have you a Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York registered?" But it was unnecessary. A belated recognition had functioned in his mind. The morocco bag stacked with the others by the door, waiting to be carried up or out, was here. His retina had photographed the gilt initials stamped on it, *M. X. C.*—X for Xanda, the numerological name which he had taken for her middle one, with her childish love for the weird—and the room number tag on it, 215.

He would not want to wake her at this hour. She loved her sleep so, the little witch. It would spoil her day tomorrow.

"A room?" he said.

"We're filled up," said the old man querulously. "We're filled up to the brim. How many times have I got to keep telling everybody that?"

"That's all right," Herbert said.

"It's not my fault," said the old man. "Don't go a-blaming me. I never see so danged many people wanting a beach vacation. I haven't even got a room to sleep myself. I've got to double up on a danged army cot with George, the day clerk, in the attic, and he leaves everything stunk up with lilac water. At my age, it's not right."

"That's too bad," said Herbert. "It doesn't really make any difference about me for tonight. I have some reading I should do. I merely thought if you had—"

"Maybe in the morning," the old man said, relenting. "Maybe somebody will die, or something. What time is it, anyway? Gosh all blazes. Two o'clock. I didn't know it was eleven yet. It's danged near morning now. Maybe someone will check out in three more hours or so. There's sometimes one or two of them that leaves to catch the five-thirty bus at Quahaug, to make the New York express at Chicopee."

"How about room two-fifteen?" said Herbert. "Has that just been taken, or is it checking out?"

"Two-fifteen?" the old man said. "Single room and bath, ocean side, rate ninety-one forty-five a week, you mean? I think there's a lady has it."

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He turned the register around.

"Yep," he said. "Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York. Registered two days ago. I kind of recollect her. Quiet young lady with blonde hair, kind of dreamy-faced. No, she's not leaving that I know of. She paid up for the week. Seems to me she said she might stay for the rest of the summer."

"I see a bag of hers here by the door, is the reason why I asked," said Herbert. "I thought perhaps she had just arrived, or was going out."

"George must have brought it and them others down," the old man said. "I'm too old for porter work. Maybe they want to have them put in the storage-room out of the way. Maybe they want to send them back home by express. No, two-fifteen is staying, far as I know. But there may always be someone else. It's not my fault I haven't got anything for you now."

"That's all right," Herbert said again. "I like to work at night, anyway. Perhaps in the morning I can arrange for a cot to be set up, if nothing more. If you don't mind my sitting here in the lobby?"

"Help yourself."

With his briefcase in his hand, Herbert turned from the desk. He selected a big club chair near the wall-light by the door, pulling it up beneath the glow of the double bulbs.

He laid his briefcase on his knees. He drew up a standing ashtray beside him. Extracting his cigar-case, he selected an *Invincible*, clipped the end and applied a match to it. He opened his briefcase, pulling forth one of the play-scripts.

The old man behind the desk across the room watched him for a few moments with blurred eyes, then gradually let his head sink down again.

CHAPTER THREE.

SCENARIO FOR MURDER.

HE had meant to get some of his reading done on the train. But the coach had been crowded and noisy, filled with grime, aisle luggage, nestling lovers, paper lunchboxes, and sticky-faced clambering children—two of the latter, with their billowing mother, sharing the same seat with him.

And even more than that, there had been the tingling anticipation of seeing Madeleine again, touched with the small but nagging possibility that she might not

be at The Breakers, after all—that she might not have got accommodations on her arrival, or might have found it too nostalgic there without him, and gone elsewhere; or might have stopped off somewhere else en route; or might have suffered some illness or amnesia, and have got to no destination.

He was not an imaginative man, Herbert Creedy. His professional skill demanded of him the antithesis of loose imagination. He was realistic, judicious, pragmatic. Still, it was too easy to think of Madeleine helpless, lost or hurt . . . with her wistful, tender smile clouded in vague mists before his eyes . . . with the sound of her gay, exclamatory voice rising and fading with the rumbling of the train wheels, running on and on with words that he could not quite understand.

It had been like the time when he had felt so ill, lying in the hospital where young Burghwaite had brought him after his collapse, and seeing her face near him, hearing her voice that way, through a thick gray veil. An elusive intangible smile, the sound of some words which she was saying to him or Burghwaite which he could not understand, though he struggled to. That had been a hellish experience.

Anyway, he had located her now. She was close to him, beneath the same roof, in her room upstairs in room two-fifteen with bath and ocean view, with the lulling hiss and suck of the sea through the open window beside her, sleeping in the deep middle of the night. She would probably awake at her usual hour, about nine or ten o'clock, however early she had gone to bed, stretching her arms and yawning. She was a little cat for sleeping.

He would go up and surprise her then, standing in the doorway while she stared at him with blank incredulous eyes, with her hand motionless over the yawn that she was patting, not believing it was he. Then she'd spring up with her trill of joy and rush into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, DARLING! This is the most WONDERFUL thing that ever HAPPENED! On our ANNIVERSARY, too! Oh, HERBERT!"

And, "I've brought you a present, witch," he would say to her then.

"Oh, Herbert! WHAT?"

"Guess."

"Oh, Herbert, don't TEASE me! Let me HAVE IT!"

"This. I call him Oscar."

"Oh, HERBERT! He is WONDERFUL! Oh, Herbert, I LOVE him! It was so SWEET of you to GIVE HIM to me! . . ."

But that would be all of seven hours from now. Maybe eight. There was quietness in the meantime. He could give all the scripts a preliminary reading. Perhaps he would have time to read three or four thoroughly, if they seemed worth it. Associated Producers wanted a murder play badly, they had said in the letter he had read at his office. And Sam Lewis wanted one.

Herbert flicked the ash from his cigar, an open script in hand. He glanced up.

The thin wisp of smoke still rose straight and motionless in the fireplace from the heap of dead ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants looked dead around the walls. The old man still slept with his head on the desk counter across the room, beneath the gooseneck lamp. At the foot of the green-carpeted staircase beside the desk, the green-and-yellow parrot still slept with its head beneath its wing. But he had a sense of something moving, drifting or creeping . . .

That was it! On the landing of the staircase facing him, halfway up, beneath the dim landing bulb, was standing a slight young man with dark hair and a pale face and shadowed eyes.

He was carrying a striped linen suitcase. For the instant he had paused with it, descending. He stood looking at Herbert Creedy sitting by the door.

Herbert put his cigar back in his mouth and sucked in smoke.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening, sir," said the young man on the staircase. He descended a step tentatively.

"It's all right," Herbert said good naturedly. "He's asleep."

The young man came on down, with his eyes on Herbert. He came across the carpeted floor, walking on the outside edges of his feet, a little skittishly, carrying his bag in his off hand, looking at Herbert. He set his bag down with the three others stacked on the other side of the door, with his eyes on Herbert.

His dark hair was glossy and a little long, with a triple wave in it. He smelled somewhat of lilac. His pale face was in shadow, outside the light of the wall-bracket above Herbert's head, but the shadows there

intensified under his eyes. He looked about twenty-one.

He paused there by the door, uncertainly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I didn't just understand your remark. Did you say something about being asleep?"

"The desk clerk," explained Herbert good-humoredly, blowing smoke. "I thought you were doing a bill-skip. I used to be a young fellow myself. I've had to try to get out with my bag, if I could, in more places than one."

"Oh, no, sir." The young man laughed dutifully. "I'm Mr. Sutts, George Sutts, the day clerk. I work here. I was just bringing down a guest's bag."

His pale face was a little damp. There was purple ink on his index and middle finger as he lifted his hand to smooth his rippling hair.

"Are you staying here long, sir?" he said.

"I don't know," said Herbert with a helpless chuckle, giving the answer expected of all American males. "You'll have to ask my wife."

"I mean, sir, are you sitting here long?"

"I've sworn an oath by all that's holy to sit here till I've found a good play," said Herbert. "One that knocks me right out of my chair."

"Oh, are you a playwright, sir?"

"Not a playwright. A play doctor."

"A play doctor? I don't understand."

"Most playwrights don't see their business perfectly," explained Herbert, a little bored, for he had explained it too many times before. "They are men of creative imagination. They leap off into the clouds without realizing it. They have a man ride a horse onto a stage, and then forget to take it off again. Or they make him ride off on a high horse, when there was no horse on. They write dialogue that looks good on the page, but that would be mush if spoken. They put in some business that sounds swell, but that nobody could possibly get away with. They are the imaginers. It's hard for them to stick to mundane things."

"I have no creative imagination myself," he explained. "I can't think up characters. I can't think up plots. Any dialogue that I do is dull, if solid. But I have an exact sense of reality. My feet are planted on the ground. I know what can be gotten away with, and what can't. So I'm a play doctor, revising and making foolproof the ideas of more imaginative men. It may sound like a

very trivial profession. It is, however, an essential one, I believe I may say—saving many good plays from failure, and keeping bad ones from being attempted at all."

He knocked the ash off his cigar and picked up the play script again, dismissing the youth. He had thought him somewhat amusing as a picture of Bill-Dodger Descending the Staircase. But a youth of that sort could amuse him just so long. He sucked on his cigar. He would have done with George Sutts.

"What do you charge for doing it, sir?" young Sutts said.

Herbert Creedy lifted his eyebrows above his small inexpressive eyes. The youth had sunk down to a seat on the stack of bags. He had his hands locked together between his knees. There were little beads of sweat on his pale, shadowed forehead.

"Twenty-five per cent of royalties is my usual arrangement," he replied. "Provided, of course, that I think the thing is worth my attention."

"I've always been interested in writing plays myself, sir," George Sutts said, making a swallowing sound. "There's a play I'd sort of like to have you analyze for me—tell me whether it could be gotten away with or not."

Herbert Creedy shuddered. He should have been on guard. The Fish Pier Theater assemblage of aspiring amateur dramatists. He had forgotten their existence momentarily. Probably every hotel clerk, taxi driver, and restaurant waitress within twenty miles was an embryonic playwright. They would swamp him in no time, if they started in on him.

"Send it to my office sometime," he said. "I'll give you my name and address, if you want."

"I'd sort of like to outline it for you, sir," George Sutts said, lacing his thin hands tightly, with the sweat upon his brow. "So long as you're going to be sitting here all night, anyway. It won't take long."

"What kind of a play is it?"

"It's a murder play."

"A formularized type," said Herbert Creedy. "A murder is committed. A menace is loose. There's a love theme between the lovely heroine and the stalwart, upstanding, unjustly suspected hero. For two acts. Act three, there's the solution, the killer's caught, the lovers clinch. I'm inclined to think the genre has been overdone. You can hardly have anything new to offer."

"But this one's different, sir."

"In the first place," said George Sutts, "there's the young fellow who's the hero. He's not just an ordinary type. He's a very good-looking and superior type, very sensitive and intelligent and charming. I call him—well, I call him Gordon. It's a good substantial name, simple and manly. He's a promising young playwright."

Herbert Creedy smiled. Most amateurs make their heroes playwrights or novelists, depending on whether they are writing plays or novels.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, there's a rich old girl who falls for him. I call her—well, I call her Mrs. Breed. Her husband is in the Army overseas. Say in Korea, or maybe Germany. It doesn't make any difference. He doesn't come into it, anyway. He's just a colonel or something overseas."

"Leave him out of it, if you don't intend to bring him into it," Herbert Creedy suggested. "Confine yourself to the characters of your play."

"Yes sir. Anyway, he's got dough, and she doesn't just have to live on his allotment. She's got a swell little apartment on—well, say Fifth Avenue in New York. All kinds of money to spend on a good time. Jewels that would knock your eye out. She's old enough to be Gordon's mother maybe, but she goes off the deep end for him. Bang, like that. He's an awfully attractive guy, naturally. All the women fall for him."

"Does he respond to her passion?" said Herbert Creedy, drawing on his cigar.

"Oh, he doesn't really respond, naturally. Who could fall for the old hen? She's as old as the hills and godawful. But he acts sweet to her, so as not to hurt her feelings. They have some parties together and good times. She doesn't support him, though. He's not a gigolo. Anyway, she thinks that men should have jobs. She just slips him a fifty now and then when he happens to mention he's broke. Naturally, being a gentleman, he takes them."

"Where's your love interest?" said Herbert Creedy.

"Well, then *she* comes in. She's young. A honey. What did I call the old dame—Mrs. Bless?"

"Mrs. Breed."

"All right, I call the girl—well, say Sue. She's just a knockout. Gordon goes off the deep end himself for her. There's nothing he wouldn't do for her. And she's just as

crazy about him. It's love, bang-up love, between them. Of course, he doesn't let Mrs. Breed know about it. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Well, there you are. The guy, Gordon, takes a job out of the city for the summer, where he can do some playwriting and not work too hard. He pretends to Mrs. Breed that he's going to get an aircraft job in Wichita or Portland. After he's started on his job he gets Sue to come and join him. Everything is rosy. And then, bang, who do you think pops on the scene? Mrs. Breed. Just out of a clear sky. God knows how she happened to come to the same place. It was just a blind accident.

"You get the situation? There she is, on the scene before Gordon knows it, and she catches him and Sue together, Well, she starts in to talk nasty and to say she'd like the money back right away that she has loaned him, and that he is just a gigolo, and other things like that. And he just kind of gets annoyed at her, and kind of strangles her."

"He kills her?"

"Well, she kind of falls down limp on the floor, and doesn't breathe any more. She's dead, anyway."

For the moment George Sutts rubbed his thin palms together, swallowing.

"You have a rather unusual power of understatement," said Herbert Creedy. "Most amateurs overstate. That strangling scene could be very moving, played with restraint. I can feel it." He drew appreciatively on his cigar.

"Yes," he meditated. "When your Gordon strangles Mrs. Breed and she kind of falls down limp—a very effective scene."

"Oh, nobody sees it happen," said George Sutts. "That would kind of ruin it. I mean it—it'd look kind of horrible. No one would like to see it. It's just something that has happened. Off the stage."

"What's the new angle that you spoke of in your play?" Herbert Creedy inquired.

"I want Gordon to get away with it," said George Sutts.

For the moment he shivered, sitting on the stack of bags. Rubbing his palms together, he regarded Herbert Creedy with his shadowed eyes.

"He's got to get away with it," he repeated. "He's the hero. He's an intelligent good-looking young guy, with all his life ahead of him. He didn't mean to choke the old buzzard to death. He didn't mean to do it so hard, anyway. She had a lot of money

and jewels with her, too, that he could use. He wants to go on having a good time. He's got to get away with it."

CHAPTER FOUR.

MADELEINE NO MORE.

HERBERT CREEDY drew on his cigar, rubbed his jowels and meditated. "Unusual," he said. "The critics might go for it. I don't think the public would like it at all, however."

"To hell," said young Sutts, "with the—I mean, just let's figure it out from that angle. How he can get away with it. So long as you are sitting here anyway, sir. Of course, if you want to get up and go, I don't want to take your time."

"That's all right," said Herbert Creedy. "You have posed a dramatic situation, and you want to know how to meet a technical problem. Does anyone besides Gordon know that he has done the murder?"

"Sue," said George Sutts, swallowing. "She knows it, naturally. She had to—she had to help. She and Gordon are just nuts about each other, though. So that's all right."

"How many people know about his previous connection with Mrs. Breed?" said Herbert. "They would bring him at once under suspicion, realistically speaking, as soon as she is found dead."

"Nobody," said George Sutts. "Nobody knows at all. The old buzzard was cagey. She was head over heels with him, but she kept him under wraps. She didn't want her husband to hear about him, when and if he came home."

"What is the location of your murder scene?" said Herbert Creedy. "Some place outside of New York, you say, where he has taken a job for the summer and has had Sue join him, and where Mrs. Breed arrived unexpectedly. But in another city, or in the country? How long before the body will be discovered? What police are there to investigate the crime? What chance is there to conceal it completely? All those questions are a part of the scene, and must be considered, you understand."

"The kind of a place where it happens—" said George Sutts—"well, it's a kind of place like here. A kind of a beach hotel like The Breakers."

"A hotel like this," repeated Herbert

Creedy. "Then of course the chambermaid comes in each morning. She will discover the body in the course of her duties, inevitably, even if no one happens on it before."

"Yes, sir," said George Sutts, straining. "That was one thing I was thinking of. I was wondering if it would be smart for him to lay her on her bed and put a bottle of sleeping tablets beside her, to make it look like suicide?"

Herbert Creedy shook his head.

"Very poor," he said. "They would analyze the stomach contents. It's murder obviously enough, anyway, with the broken trachea and other medical indications of how she had died. There are the finger marks alone, showing conspicuously in her flesh. They would be measured against the hands of everybody there, including Gordon's, presumably. And there you are."

"Yes, sir, I thought of that, too," said George Sutts, swallowing. "That's why I gave up the sleeping tablets. But what if she was found out in the ocean? The marks on her throat might be only rock bruises then. And maybe it would be days or weeks, and there wouldn't be much at all." He swallowed again.

"If you had your murder taking place beside the ocean, yes," said Herbert Creedy. "Though an ocean is difficult to stage. Since for reasons of your play, however, you have had it happen in the hotel, then you would have to get her down to the ocean. You can't go lugging dead bodies around. The desk clerk or people in the lobby might see you carrying her out."

"I thought of that," said George Sutts, rubbing his thin hands. "I thought perhaps he could kind of walk her out as though she was kind of drunk. You know, just kind of stumbling along, with his arm around her."

Herbert Creedy smiled.

"It's been used at times in movies or on the stage," he said. "However, it is always highly unconvincing. A dead body is not a living person. It is either rigid, or very soft. You can try using it as a device, of course. But nobody would believe you."

"I was afraid of that," said George Sutts. "Then I thought maybe of putting her body in a trunk and shipping it to California."

"It would be discovered en route," said Herbert Creedy. "Such things are only an additional advertisement and an additional challenge to the police. Unless Gordon is

extraordinarily powerful physically—which I have not understood you to conceive him to be—then someone would have to help him with the trunk. Regardless of that, he must deliver it to an express office or an expressman, and sign for the valuation. The trunk itself must have been procured some place. They know his face, they have his signature, and in any situation he can be traced. He had better jump into the ocean and drown himself rather than try anything like that."

"I figured that out myself," said George Sutts, swallowing.

Herbert took out his cigar and looked at it. It had gone dead.

"I find the situation dramatically interesting," he said. "The technical problem. You have a gift of creating character, undoubtedly. You have made it very vivid. Much more so than the ordinary play. I can almost see Gordon. I don't think the public would like it at all. But just as an intellectual problem, I'd like as much as you to figure out how he would get away with it. "Suppose—"

He chewed on his cigar.

"Suppose you had him cut the body up and put it in some ordinary luggage bags," he said. "He could carry them out one by one, without being noticed at all. Suppose there's some place nearby like Rotten Bottom Swamp below, that dogs and even cows used to be lost in, before it was fenced off. Then you could have him take the bags down there and heave them over the fence, and that's an end of it. Of course it would take several bags, and you might have some difficulty fitting in the head. But it's the way to do it."

"That's the way I'm doing it," said George Sutts. "With a hatbox for the head."

Herbert Creedy nodded appreciatively.

"The hatbox is a nice touch," he said. "Yes, that makes it perfect. Nobody knows that Gordon ever knew Mrs. Breed. Maybe nobody knows that she has come to his hotel. She has just disappeared. He's got her money and jewels, and his girl. The girl is in it with him, and she'll never squeal. He's got away with it."

"God!" he said, using an expletive which he seldom used. "It's the damndest play I ever heard of! What ghastly people!"

George Sutts had arisen. Sweat was on his face. He looked at Herbert Creedy with his hollow, shadowed eyes. He swallowed.

"Would you mind moving your chair, sir?"

"Moving my chair?" said Herbert.

"You are blocking the door," said George Sutts in his soft, dead voice. "Didn't you know it?"

Herbert Creedy looked around him, with a surprised and baffled face. It was, he saw, a fact. In drawing up the big club-chair under the wall-bracket, he had let three or four inches of it protrude over the door edge.

His bag on the floor, too. He had pushed it over, and it was right in front of the door.

"Why, I beg your pardon!" he said, arising and pulling at the chair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you were sitting here on purpose," said George Sutts, swallowing. "When you said you weren't going to move till you found a play that knocked you over, I thought you meant it. Thanks."

He picked up the bag he had brought down, and tucked it under his left arm. He picked up one of the three stacked by the door, and caught it up under his right arm. He did it rather swiftly. He stooped and picked up the other two bags in his hands. With his foot he shoved Herbert Creedy's bag out of the way, and caught a hooked finger on the doorknob and opened it.

In the fireplace ash-buried embers caught and began suddenly to blaze. The dusty palmtrees in their pots seemed to shiver and stir green, like jungle trees after a drenching rain. The gurgling of the old man sleeping at the desk was like the gurgling of cutthroat lizzards. The parrot sleeping on its perch at the staircase lifted its head and screamed.

The snaps of Herbert Creedy's bag had sprung open as George Sutts kicked it, spilling forth its contents. From amidst the melange of shirts, socks, swim-trunks, beach-robe and toilet-case, the little black demon rolled forth, and stood nodding on the floor, leering at Sutts with its crocodile grin.

George Sutts gave it one terrified glance, with eyes dark as dead coals, with face as white as paper. Clutching and gripping his load of bags, he went rushing out the door.

Herbert Creedy clung to the arm of the chair that he had pulled out of the way. His blood was like water.

That play had gripped him, damn it. It had been so horrible—the murder of that poor woman, the wife of a man serving overseas, by a cheap Lothario, while perhaps his little hussy of a sweetheart watched and cheered him on. It had been so vivid—his scheming how he could dispose of her body, planning how he would use her money and her jewels. . . .

Madeleine, he realized, was thirty years old now. She might seem like an old hag, he didn't know, to a pin-feathered boy like that. Her household allowance, her nice but simple little jewels, though no more than his moderate prosperity allowed, might seem like vast wealth to George Sutts.

The purple ink on the fellows' fingertips, like the purple ink on that empty envelope, lilac-tinted, on Madeleine's desk!

And the fellow had taken out her morocco bag, too!

Oh, God! Madeleine, with him away, turning blindly for affection where she might find it, to become the victim of a ghastly hyena like that! . . .

He didn't know how he had got up the stairs. But he was standing in the green-carpeted corridor, in front of one of the white doors which had the numerals 215 on it, pounding on it with something that he had in his hand. He gripped the knob and lunged against it.

"What on EARTH do you want? Who on earth ARE you?"

Madeleine's voice!

What a fool he had been!

His limbs felt about to collapse with sheer nerve exhaustion. He looked down at his hand—at what he had been using to knock on the door. It was the little devil-god. He must have picked it up from the floor. He smiled at it weakly.

He must be calm; not show her what an emotional, excited fool he had been. "Hello, witch," he said. "It's Herbert."

"HERBERT!"

"Sorry to wake you up at this ungodly hour," he said. "It's really me, though. I got back. Can you let me in?"

"Oh, Herbert, DARLING! I can't BELIEVE it!"

She was turning the bolt. The door opened. She stood there. With her little trill of joy, she rushed up against his chest as he stepped in.

Her blonde hair was tousled and damp beneath his chin. She had on a bathrobe.

"I wasn't REALLY asleep," she said. "You can SEE I haven't been to bed yet. I had just finished taking a BATH. I felt so STICKY. Oh, Herbert, I must have had a PREMONITION you were coming! I felt it in my BONES! How on EARTH did you find me here?"

"Just a hunch, witch," he said, keeping his voice calm. "Came home and you weren't there. I had a hunch you must have come up here for our anniversary."

"It IS our seventh anniversary, ISN'T it?"
"The sixth," he said. "Since midnight."

"Oh, Herbert, you always get things so STRAIGHT. You seem AGITATED, darling. I can feel your HEART beating."

"I just had a play told to me by a would-be playwright," he apologized. "A youthful Ancient Mariner who got hold of me. It certainly was a ghastly one. It scared me."

She drew back from him, with her hands upon his chest, looking up at him with a question in her eyes.

"Really?" she said. "Herbert, what WAS it?"

"Nothing," he said. "Forget it. I brought back something to give you, witch. Do you like it?"

He lifted his right hand, with the little demon in it. The devil-god leered at her, as it had at Sutts, and before him, at the lime-smeared black man on Vella Lavella with the murder-sharp bolo in his hand. . . .

Madeleine opened her mouth to scream.

In that instant, across her shoulder, he glanced again at the hatbox sitting on the bed. A hatbox with E. B. on it.

He had seen it the instant he stepped in. Emily Blennerhassett, without any doubt. Mrs. Blennerhassett, the poor blank-brained gay old sport, with her fondness for young people, with her cocktail parties and her frizzled hair and paint and her sixteen-year-old clothes. With her money and her diamonds. Mrs. Blennerhassett had been Mrs. Breed. Her poor painted face was in that bag now. . . .

This was Sutts' precious Sue standing before him—Madeleine.

He thought of his illnesses, of the soups which Madeleine had fed him, of young Dr. Burghwaite's gravity and alarm. He thought of the rat poison he had found.

And he thought of the little horse-chestnut figure with the clam face which he had bought her on their honeymoon, while she had been shopping for something at the drug counter of the Pharmacy and Gift Shoppe, perhaps already buying rat poison. The little figure which she had named Herbert, and which she had stuck a pin through.

He thought about Madeleine, up long past her usual bedtime, having just taken a shower. . . .

He thought of littler and lesser things. On her coming rushing in so often and so late, saying that she had been at the museum again. He realized now that the museum

closed at five o'clock. He thought of many things.

But perhaps he had thought of them before, in the back of his mind, and for a long time. Perhaps he had thought them over thoroughly, and to the last bitter dregs. Perhaps he had been thinking of them when he had picked up the little devil-god there on Vella Lavella to give her. He had been thinking of her, yes. And the black man had a look at his face, and had been terrified.

She had tried to murder him from the first, for what money he had, for his insurance. She had deceived him. He had been almost twice her age when they married. He should have known; he should have expected it.

Anyway, he had brought back the demon to give her.

This was Madeleine! This was Madeleine, his lovely Madeleine, with her tender, wistful smile, her golden hair, her wide, innocent eyes. But soon it would be Madeleine no more. . . .

Even in that moment, with his realistic mind, Herbert Creedy knew that he could get away with it. He hadn't told Grace at the office where he was going; she would assume he had merely taken the scripts to read at home, and by law between them he was not to be disturbed while reading. When he had brought them back, read, she would be willing to swear to his alibi, with conviction.

But even that was not necessary. No one would remember him on the crowded train. The hatchet-faced bus driver, half asleep, and the other half of his mind without wits, would not be able to identify him. Nor the sleepy old man downstairs, to whom he had not given his name.

Only George Sutts would remember him. But George would remember him to his regret. Madeleine would have love letters in her baggage from George Sutts, undoubtedly, and this thing could be pinned very easily on George.

Yet, he could get away with it, he knew, with his realistic and pragmatic mind. He knew it without question. Perhaps he had thought it all out before. But he didn't know if he wanted to get away with it. It made no difference to him now. Nothing did.

This was Madeleine. But Madeleine no more. . . .

THE EXPENDABLE EX

Exciting Detective Novelette

By LARRY HOLDEN

Mel Blaine really bled when his gorgeous ex-wife's boyfriend got juggled for murder. Because Mel had a hot tip that he himself, the innocent bystander, was due to get framed and hung!

CHAPTER ONE.

IF THE FRAME FITS . . .

IT wasn't a fight. It wasn't even a reasonable facsimile. He just walked up to the bar and hit me. I went down and stayed down. He bent over me, said something in an angry voice and walked away. I didn't understand a word of it. I was too groggy, and he had an accent you could have spread on pumpnickel. To this day I don't know what he looked like, except at the minute I had the impression that he was eight feet tall and had a fist the size of a policeman's foot.

A pair of slim, good-looking legs waded up through the surf around me, and a tiny, tinkling voice asked anxiously, "Are you hurt, Mel?"

I tried to say, "Hell no, I'm fine, just fine," but nothing came out. Two pairs of arms hoisted me to my feet, and I hung between them like a deflated balloon. A masculine voice said in awe, "What a slap in the chops that was! I thought his head was coming right off. His neck musta stretched six inches!" Something hard clicked against my teeth and the tinkling voice said, "Here, drink this, Mel."

I opened my mouth and something liquid washed down my throat and over my chin. It had no flavor at all, but presently a warm spot of strength grew in my stomach, and muscles crawled back into my arms and legs. The fog rolled back, the sun came out, and there was Helene, my lovely ex-wife, holding a shot-glass and looking worriedly into my face.

I gave her a foolish grin. I mumbled, "Y'oughtta watch out. Don't know y'own strength."

She said crisply to the man on my right—it was the barkeep—"He'll be all right. Just prop him up at the bar and he'll feel natural."

I muttered, "All except my jaw. That feels twice as natural."

Between them, they hoisted me on a bar stool, and the barkeep hurried around back and poured something potent in a tall glass and set it before me. Helene wasn't feeling as pert as she sounded, for she hovered at my elbow and fussed until I picked up the glass with both hands and took a messy swallow.

I leered at her and said, "You can be the first to carve your initials in my plaster cast."

She bit her lip, and her hands clenched. She said bitterly, "Why do you always have to come up with a wisecrack, Mel?"

I winked. It was an effort. "I'm British," I said. "I'm keeping a stiff upper lip. In fact, my whole face is stiff." I touched it gingerly. "Can I buy you a drink?" I said hopefully.

She looked at me and her brows went down in a straight, uncompromising line, but she climbed on the stool beside me. "I'll buy my own, thanks," she said stiffly.

I raised a finger to the barkeep. "For the lady," I said, "a double Mickey Finn with just a touch of lemon."

"A double martini, please. I want to talk to you, Mel."

"No, you don't. You want to talk *at* me. But first I want to ask you a question. Why did you have your friend take a poke at me?"

"He wasn't a friend!"

"Oh, come now, Helene. I know you better than that. You wouldn't have a total stranger sock me. You have better manners. But the question is still—why?"

"It was your own fault," she said defensively. "You were following me around again. But, believe me, Mel, I'm sorry he hit you. I didn't think he'd do that. I didn't tell him to. I just saw you sitting here at the bar and I said, 'Oh, damn, there's that hangdog ex of mine airedaling around

after me again.' He said he'd take care of that. I didn't think he'd just walk up and hit you. I thought he'd say something to you."

"He did," I said. "He said something to me. Pay no attention to that poke in the snoot. That was just to put me in a receptive mood. But, darling, promise me one thing. The next time you have somebody do you a favor—have him do it on somebody else. . . . You're even lovelier than I remembered you, Helene."

"That's enough of that, Mel!"

"I love you, Helene."

"That's over now. It's finished. And you've got to stop following me wherever I go. I don't like it and . . . Frank doesn't like it."

I said hollowly, "Frank? Is this something new? Where did you get a Frank?"

"Frank Delmar. We're going to be married."

I gaped at her. I said, unbelievably, "Not Frank Delmar, the guy who runs the Chinese Garden Club on the Palisades?"

"That's one of his interests," she said primly. "I met him at the horse show in Long Island."

"I'll bet you did! He must have gone crazy trying to fix all those horses. I'll bet it broke his heart."

She said, too quietly, "Stop it, Mel."

I stammered on, "But he's a crook, Helene. That Chinese Garden Club of his is a gambling house. It's crooked enough to rate a Congressional investigation. He's a crooked sports promoter. He runs a crooked bookie's syndicate. Good Lord, Helene, he's the world's worst revolving wolf, he's—"

She sprang off her stool. Her hand licked out and caught me on the side of the chin. She stood for a moment, her eyes blazing, then turned and walked toward the door, her heels clicking angrily. I just sat and stared stupidly, long after the doorway was empty.

The bartender said sadly, "You ought to have your picture taken while you still have a chin. You're not going to have it much longer at the rate you're going." I had knocked my glass over, and he picked it up and gave me a refill. "On the house," he said. Then sympathetically, "Your wife?"

"My ex. She says she's going to marry Frank Delmar," I said dully.

He whistled and pushed out his underlip. "She keeps pretty fancy company, don't she? What do you know about that,

now!" He leaned forward confidentially. "Y'know, I'd of put money on it that you were the high card in her hand. You should have heard her tell off that guy who put the slug on you."

"That guy! I'd like to meet him again."

"No, you wouldn't," he said earnestly.

"Believe me, friend, you don't want to meet him again—ever." His voice dropped a notch. "That was Sonny Sundstrom, the wrestler."

"He should stick to wrestling," I said sourly. "I'll report him to the Prizefighters' Union." I drained my glass. "Fill it up."

"Ain't you going a little strong?" he asked mildly.

Waking up the next morning was a pocket cataclysm, but after a shower, a shave and a breakfast of tomato, orange, grapefruit and pineapple juice, I felt well enough to face the world without a wheelchair.

I finished dressing with one of those clip-on bow ties because the ordinary kind felt like a noose around my neck, and went down to the office—the Mel Blaine Advertising Agency. In addition to the twelve staff artists I had working for me, I was also running a school of advertising and fashion art which was rated among the top ten in the state.

Quite a hive of industry.

I wasn't in the mood for a hive of industry this morning. I was still sick about Helene and Delmar. My secretary looked up from her typing as I walked in and I said grumpily, "Morning," and started for my office.

She chuckled, "Been on the brew, stew?" She'd been with me since the beginning, and sometimes she took a bit of latitude. She was about forty-five, with a nice, big, motherly shape and graying hair. I called her Calamity Jane. She knew more about the business than any of us, and believe me, whenever she thought anything was *right* we all danced around with the daisy chain.

"That ex-cellmate of yours called," she said.

That stopped me in the doorway. I said, "Helene?" I didn't turn because I didn't want her to see my face. I couldn't even think of Helene anymore without it showing naked in my face. "Call her back," I said in a muffled voice. "I'll take it in the office."

She jeered, "Don't be dumb, chum."

"Call her back!" I snapped. "And for

Pete's sake, no wisecracks!" That hit me too, a little. That had been Helene's complaint—my wisecracks. It's a habit you get into, like clearing your throat unnecessarily or pulling your ear or digging people in the ribs with your thumb to emphasize a joke. Annoying.

She made an exasperated noise, and I went into the office. I didn't even take off my hat and topcoat, but went straight to the desk and sat fidgeting on the edge of it, waiting for the buzz that would tell me I was through to Helene.

When it came, I snatched up the phone and said eagerly, "Hello, darling. This is Mel. Calamity said you called."

There was a slight pause and she said, "Oh, it's you," in that flat, chilling voice only women seem to have.

I tried to ride over it. "You're up before noon," I said brightly. "What happened? Did the furniture company repossess your bed?" I was wisecracking again. I couldn't help it.

When her voice came, it sounded as if she were dragging it uphill at the end of a fifty-foot rope. "Mell," she said heavily, "I think I'm going to kill you."

I laughed feebly. She didn't sound as if she were joking, but maybe that would come later. "You can't do it today, darling," I said. "It's the thirteenth and that's unlucky. Can you make it for the fourteenth?"

She waited until I finished, then went on in the same relentless voice, "I love Frank Delmar. You're not going to mess it up, Mel. I won't let you."

"I'm sorry about what I said yesterday, darling," I said swiftly. "I just shot off my fat mouth and I apologize. I was still dizzy from that pasting your wrestler friend gave me. Let me tell you a funny thing . . ."

I stopped and looked, bewildered, into the phone. It was dead. She had hung up. There wasn't any joke. She had said what she wanted to say and there wasn't any more.

I dropped the phone back into its cradle and mechanically reached for a cigarette. The door opened. It was Calamity. A lopsided grin ran up her mouth and deep into her cheek. She'd been listening in.

I said quickly, "Now I know she loves me, Calam. She wants to kill me. That's a sure sign, isn't it?"

"That so?" Then dryly, "Everybody in town seems to know she's marrying that louse Frank Delmar except you."

"She told me last night."

Calamity shrugged. "Did you see the morning paper?"

"No, and I don't want to. What's it got to interest me on a day like today?"

"Take a look."

She crossed the office and spread the paper on the desk before me. Delmar's face looked up from a two-column cut, and over it was a four column forty-eight point Bodoni bold head:

**WRESTLER SLAIN;
GAMBLER HELD**
Frank Delmar
Denies Guilt;
Claims Frame

I said, "Wow!" and my eyes ran down into the body of the story. "Sonny Sundstrom! That's the guy who clipped me yesterday. Ha! Delmar was his manager. That explains it."

Calamity said stolidly, "That so? Read it."

I shot her a puzzled glance, and she waved her hand at the paper. "Read it," she said woodenly.

I didn't need much arguing, but her attitude seemed a little funny. I shrugged and turned back to read the item in the newspaper.

It was the bulldog edition, and just the bare bones of the story was there. A chambermaid, named Emma something or other, had gone into Delmar's suite in the apartment-hotel he owned and turned up what she thought were two bodies. She went screaming for the police. Sundstrom was dead with four bullets in him, but Delmar was only unconscious from a clip behind the ear. The gun from which the bullets had been fired was lying on the rug between them. There were no fingerprints on the gun.

In a statement issued to the press through his attorney, Leo X. O'Connor, Delmar said that as he walked into his suite at 5 a.m., he was struck on the head by a man who leaped at him from behind the opened door.

"He was about six feet tall and had broad shoulders," Delmar alleged. "I had never seen him before, but I feel sure I can identify him, for the light of the hotel sign outside the window shone across his face as he attacked me."

The police were making the usual gestures. The tone of the story said they were sceptical.

I looked up at Calamity and said, "So what? He was Sundstrom's manager. Maybe

he was double-crossing the guy; maybe they got in an argument and Sundstrom tried to hang one on him. Sundstrom's an eager beaver that way, believe me. Delmar shot him. That mysterious attacker never existed. Delmar invented him for a cover-up."

She said grimly, "Don't be a droop. Ransack that alleged mind of yours and see if you can find any six-foot, broad-shouldered attackers anywhere among your acquaintances."

I said, "Huh?"

"One picture is worth a thousand words. C'mere!" She took my wrist and jerked me off the desk. She led me across the office and stood me before the mirror over a Chippendale console table I had once bought when I liked Chippendale.

"Figure it out for yourself. You're six feet high. Your shoulders are probably padded, but they look broad. Your wife is engaged to Delmar, and now she wants to shoot you. I'm saying it in English so you can understand it? Can you add?"

I said faintly, "Why don't you lay off the goof butts?" But I stared into the mirror, and the face that stared back at me looked white and scared. "Hell!" I roared, turning on her. "What are you trying to do, give me the creeping meemees? You're out of your mind!" I took out a cigarette, found a match in my vest pocket and fumbled a light for myself.

"Be reasonable," I said. "Look at this thing logically and calmly. . . ."

She said, "Why not? But in the meantime, if you'd put the matches back in your vest pocket and take the lighted cigarette out, you'd be a lot happier. Hell, Mel, this isn't a joke, damn it! They're rigging you for a hot squat."

I said uneasily, "Talk-talk-talk. . . ."

"Okay," she said, tossing up her hands. "I've had my say; now it's your turn. Shoot, shoot."

"Cut it out, Calam, will you?"

"Okay. What are you going to do?"

"Go down to police headquarters and have a talk with Delmas. I'll straighten that out!"

"That's fine," she said. "That's just dandy. Don't forget to take your toothbrush. They won't even bother opening the door when they throw you in the jug. They'll push you through the bars like hamburger."

"I had nothing to do with it," I said stubbornly.

"Neither did I, but I'm keeping it to myself."

"And I don't want Helene thinking I did."

"Don't worry about Helene. She couldn't hit the side of Sidney Greenstreet with a shotgun." She patted my arm and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Okay, Mel," she said quietly. "It's your bundle. But for heaven's sake, keep away from headquarters."

There was sense in that, and I nodded. "All I'm going to do is find out where I was last night."

She groaned, "Omigod, I thought you knew!"

CHAPTER TWO.

MELANCHOLY BABY.

CHARLEY'S BAR AND GRILL was on Market Street, Corned Beef and Cabbage a Specialty. Homey. That was my first stop. I didn't expect the same barkeep to be on duty, but he was. He turned out to be Charley, himself.

I hunched on a stool and ordered a beer, and when he brought it I said, "Remember me? I was the guy that got slapped down by Sonny Sundstrom."

He leaned on his bar towel and peered at me. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Your chin looks a little different today. Black and blue. You were in here with a dame, your ex-wife, you said. I remember now. Say, she was in here a little while ago asking about you."

I gripped the edge of my stool. I tried to keep my voice casual. "Asking about me? What'd she say?"

"Nothing much. Like, 'What'd you say after she left, and so forth.'"

"What'd you tell her?"

He gave me a friendly grin. "I gave you the build-up, boy. I said you were nuts about her, and that the idea of her marrying Delmar had you all busted out at the seams. Which was about the truth, when you come to think of it. That's just about what you did say, plus your personal opinion of Delmar, which I didn't repeat on account of I got better sense. She asked me about that."

I stopped breathing. "You said?"

"Nothing much. Just to make sense, I said you didn't think much of him, but she already knew that because you told her." He grinned.

I moved my mouth and hoped it looked like a grin. "What else did she ask?"

He was getting a little impatient now. Other customers were drifting in, and he wanted to get to them.

"Hell," he said, starting to sidle away. "I don't remember exactly. She asked where you went from here, and I told her you wanted to go out and hear some piano player because he made you sad. Why don't you ask her yourself? She probably remembers it better than I do."

I'll bet she does, I thought as he moved off. I'll bet every word is chiseled on her mind like an epitaph on a tombstone.

My epitaph.

I sat there, choking my beer with both hands, trying to remember all the pianists who made me sad. They all did, it seemed to me. They were all imitating somebody else. I knew damn well I hadn't gone to New York to hear one of the really top boys, and most of the rest weren't worth a wooden nickel.

It came out of the blue, just like that. Eddie Woods.

I liked Eddie Woods. He had a nice, easy, melancholy style, solid in the bass and not top fancy in the right hand, the way most of them are. Arpeggios! He's on the way up. If you go in for records, pick up his *Mood Indigo*, the only rubber he's cut so far. In another few years, it'll be a collector's item.

I scooped up my change and walked out without even touching my beer. Finding when Eddie Woods was playing was child's play—which made it especially easy for me, because I was beginning to feel like a babe in the woods in the worst sense. I picked up a paper and learned from the amusement page that he was featured in a place called the Blue Door on Clinton Avenue.

That part of it was easy. It stopped being so easy when I found the place closed. It had a blue door, all right—a pretty crummy-looking blue door, and even crummier because it was locked. I banged on it until even the street cleaner stopped to look at me, and street cleaners never stop for anything.

I peered through the slitted slats of the venetian blinds that hung down the door. Inside was a large oval bar with the stools standing upside down on it. In the center of the oval was a small white piano on a platform. I began to remember it now. I had sat at the bar just a little behind the piano to Eddie Woods' left, so I could watch his hands while he played. I remember talking to him. He had a kind of thick voice. Not husky, but thick, as if he were talking through a mouthful of oatmeal. I

remembered requesting *Melancholy Baby* and *I Got a Right to Sing the Blues*, Ethel Waters' old number.

If I had talked to anyone there, it would have been to Eddie Woods. In a hot spot like that, the barkeeps would have been too busy with the trade to exchange the weather or the time of day with anybody except the bar creeps who came every night. Eddie Woods.

I had an uneasy feeling, that I couldn't explain, about looking up Eddie Woods, but it had to be done. If I had gone to hear Eddie Woods the night before, I would have stayed right through until closing, and that would account for just that much more of my time. And if I had talked to him, he would remember it. I get awfully talkative when I'm frisky with whiskey. There I go, damn it! That's Calamity's influence. But what I mean is, he'd know if I had talked to him. And after closing, I probably would have invited him down to Jimmie the Oysterman's down on River Street for clams. I always did.

Take my word for it—when things break too easy, watch out! Things broke too easy for me. Finding Eddie Woods wasn't even a problem. I simply called the paper and got the amusement page editor—a guy named Alan Brandywine—and asked him where Eddie Woods was bedding down. Alan knew everything.

"Eddie Woods?" he said. "What do you want with that piano plumber? He's staying at the Hotel Evans. But if you're after his autograph, he can't write. And if you ask me, he can't read either, and I mean music."

"I love him," I said. "He makes me glad I'm not a piano."

"If you want to hear a pianist. . . ."

"I don't. All I want to do is tear a herring with this guy. How about lunch one of these days?"

"Every time you ask me to lunch," he said resignedly, "you try to sell me a bill of goods. Who are you press-agenting now?"

"Forget that episode. It was only an idea and it didn't work. I'm staying with straight advertising and the hell with publicity."

"Fine. Thursday, and you pay for the lunch."

"That's blackmail, but okay. See you at Jimmie the Oysterman's."

"Shrimps!" he groaned.

The Hotel Evans was a new glazed-tile-and-steel monolith up near the courthouse in the heart of the city, very convenient

when you're up for trial. And don't think the characters who stayed there had much else on their minds. It was the acknowledged hangout.

When I went to the desk and asked for Eddie Woods, the desk clerk looked surprised that I hadn't flashed a badge in the palm of my hand.

The tone of his voice told me that I had lost some of his respect. "Mr. Woods? I'll see if he's in, sir."

He turned to the phone. His hair looked like groomed licorice. But when he turned back, his eyes had a funny, oblique look and there was a little ragged edge to his voice, as if the professional suavity had only been plated on and it was beginning to peel.

"Mr. Woods is in room ten-ten," he said, and watched me cross the lobby. He was still watching when I entered the elevator.

In the elevator was a small bulletin board, announcing certain activities in the hotel—*Swoop McGoo and his Raggedy Andys playing Nitely in the Grotto Room*—but prominently displayed was Eddie Woods' name. On Friday, June 6, it said. Eddie Woods would present a unique recital in Mosque Hall entitled, "The History of Jazz," with an interpolated commentary by Cass Duluth, music critic of the *Post*, tickets .75, 1.00, 1.50 and 2.00.

That was strictly to whistle!

I looked again to make sure it said Mosque Hall. It did.

Mosque Hall has a seating capacity of five thousand, and unless Eddie Woods had gotten himself underwritten, he'd be in hock for the rest of his life just paying the rental, because nobody without an organization was going to sell enough tickets to fill Mosque Hall.

As I walked down the corridor I could hear the thunder of a full-throated piano beating out the honkatonk rhythms of George Gershwin's *American in Paris*. The piano stopped when I pushed the buzzer beside the door.

Eddie Woods was big—bigger than I remembered him hunched over that piano in the Blue Door. He had big, square hands, twice as thick as mine, and hard with muscle. He had on a sweat shirt, a pair of sloppy corduroy slacks and bedroom slippers. His face was sullen and heavy, and the lines lifted scarcely at all when he smiled.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "*The Melancholy Baby* guy. I wondered what the hell Mel Blaine looked like. Come in." He jerked

his head and turned from the door. His invitation wasn't cordial or even friendly. It was off-hand and a little hard.

He shuffled over to the baby grand near the window and sat loosely on the stool. There was a glass of buttermilk on the floor beside the piano and he picked it up, sipped it and watched me over the rim of the glass.

I stood in the middle of the room, twirling my hat in my hands and wondering how to start without seeming a complete damn fool, when he asked derisively, "Did you ever get that bellyful of clams you were talking about?"

"Oh, yes, sure," I said, "I got them all right." So that's where I had gone after the Blue Door—down to Jimmie the Oyster-man's on River Street. I put out a feeler. "That was quite a conversation we had last night."

"If you want to call it that." He finished the buttermilk and put the glass back on the floor. His left hand strayed to the keyboard and wove an intricate pattern of triplets, but that must have been mechanical with him, for he lifted his head and looked at me. "Fact is," he said, his voice hardening, "after that little conversation, I can't figure what the hell you're doing here today."

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I said feebly, "You can't?" I began to feel a little sick again. So I had shot my mouth off there, too. I wet my lips. "Sorry if I offended you," I apologized, "but I was feeling a little low. My wife . . ."

"Your ex-wife. Remember?"

I closed my eyes. "She was here?" My voice seemed to come from a long way off. "Yeah. Quite a coincidence, eh?" His fingers ran through a series of jangling minor chords—edged, mocking music. "She didn't seem to like you much, friend. You're unpopular."

"What—what did she say?" I stammered.

"Well, let's see now." He made a pretense of trying to recall. He was enjoying watching me sweat. It came out in the unconscious lift he gave to his lefthand improvisations. He was one of those musicians who did all his thinking and feeling on the piano. "Oh, yeah, she wanted some information." His left hand hammered a crashing chord. He leaned forward and snapped, "About Frankie Delmar—what you'd said about him. I told her, Blaine. I guess I'm just a sucker for a beautiful dame. And I'm a truthful guy. I told her you were going to see to it that Frankie wouldn't get within ten miles of an altar with her. Your exact words."

I stood before him, my shoulders slumped, and out of this desolation came marching the remembrance of my own words, slow-walking to funeral music, damning me with every beat.

I said incoherently, "I didn't mean—it was just the kind of thing you say when—I didn't mean—"

The piano stopped and he stood. "What didn't you mean, Blaine?" he asked. He looked genuinely curious, his head tilted a little to one side, his eyebrows arched.

"I didn't mean anything," I mumbled. "I didn't mean a thing. I was just talking. I think I'll run along. Thanks a lot." I turned to go.

He said, "Wait a minute, friend." Then, softly, "So you're the no-good rat who put the boots to Frankie Delmar!"

Too late I saw his right shoulder drop. I flung up my arm, but his hard, thick fist slid over it and caught me on the mouth. I went staggering and flailing back into the wall. I struck a chair with my out-flung hand, numbing my hand. He leaped forward and clipped me again just under the eye. I twisted and fell over my own legs. Lying on my side, I saw the bedroom door open behind him and a small, thin man in a

plaid suit slip into the room. I had enough sense to lie still. He looked inquiringly at Woods, who stood beside me, breathing hard and shaking his right hand as if it hurt. He examined his knuckles, breathed on them and wrapped his left hand over them.

The thin man said nasally, "You're a damn fool. What did you do, break it?"

"Just skinned a little." He wriggled his fingers experimentally. "I've been wanting to pin one on this guy ever since last night. I gave him fair warning. I told him then that Frankie was the guy who was putting up the dough for my recital, and if he opened his yap once more, I'd fill it full of ex-teeth. I didn't know then what was on his mind. See that he don't get up. I'm going to call the Lion and see what he wants done with him."

The thin man said, "Do that. He'll be interested." He crossed the room and stood beside me, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets, the thumbs hooked outside. Woods went into the bedroom, still rubbing his knuckles.

I looked at the little man's feet. He was balanced on his left leg, his right foot drawn back. A kicker, I thought. All the better. I waited till I heard Woods' voice on the phone, then lurched to my hands and knees. The foot swept forward in a vicious arc. I caught it on my shoulder, twisted, grabbed his ankle and pushed it straight up. He went over backwards.

I flung myself on him and clubbed him on both sides of the neck, then scrambled to my feet and darted for the door.

I was half way out when Woods yelled behind me, "Hey, wait a minute! Leo wants to see you. Hey, Blaine!"

I darted into the hall. I was at the head of the stairs when he reached the door. He roared with laughter.

"Go ahead, run!" he guffawed. "There's a cop on every corner and two in every prowling car. If you're smart, you'll go and see. . . ."

The rest was lost in the clatter of my feet down the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE.

MEL BLAINE, GUMSHOE.

THE desk clerk saw me go through the lobby. His jaw dropped, and after a petrified instant, he jumped for the phone. The word had gotten down that far already—Blaine

is the rat who put the frame on Frankie Delmar. Get Blaine. I scurried through the revolving door, hesitated a moment and turned south, away from the Courthouse.

My face hurt. It shot splinters of pain into my eyes and into my brain and, worse, into what was left of my mind. If you've gone along for years being a plain, ordinary citizen, you can't get flung into something like this without feeling that the solid world is disintegrating around you. I felt lost, trapped, hunted, beaten, all in one; and no matter where I looked, my eyes seemed to be fumbling through the distorted focus that goes with crumbling sanity.

I lurched along for two blocks before I was able to pull myself up enough to notice the stares of the passers-by, the way they drew away when I approached.

I turned into one of those big, milling, red-front lunchrooms, and walked straight back to the men's room with my head down. It was the best place I could have picked. It was a kind of bum's hangout, a place where you could get a glass of beer and a sandwich for fifteen cents, a hot meal for a quarter. Mine wasn't the only black eye in the place.

But I wasn't expecting what I found in the mirror over the grimy washbowl. I had a pair of lips like inner tubes, my eye was discolored and my left cheek was puffy, and from the cut on the cheekbone a dribble of blood had snaked down my face. And the old bruise on my chin, where Sundstrom had clipped me, was sullenly purple and mustard yellow.

I washed as well as I could with my handkerchief. There wasn't any soap and I wouldn't have touched that roller towel with asbestos gloves. I went into one of the booths and dried my face on my shirt-tail. Then I combed my hair. I didn't resemble any Mel Blaine I had ever known. Which was all to the good, I suppose. This wasn't the face that sold a million bars of soap in '46.

The phone booth was next to the wash-room, and I slipped in and called Calamity at the office.

She said cheerfully, "What's new, stew?" "Just listen and do exactly what I say," I said swiftly. "Call the airport and take a ticket for M. Blaine on the next plane for anywhere—Florida. Have Joe Chandler pick it up." Chandler was one of my artists, and he was about my build. "Tell him, when he gets where he's going, to go to the best hotel and wait for me. In case

he gets curious, tell him I'm working on an account. Got that?"

I heard her breathe heavily into the phone. "What kind of fool trick is this, Mel?" she asked.

"Sister," I said, "I'm scared. They've got nine hooks in me now and the tenth is going to jerk me right out of the water. I'm not running away, Calam, but I need time. If they pick up Joe Chandler's trail out of the airport, it'll give me a breather. But God knows," I said despairingly, "what I'm going to do with it!"

She didn't cut up or put the rough edge on me, the way she usually did. She just said quietly, "All right, Mel. Give me a ring if you need anything."

"I sure will. Thanks, Calam."

And now it begins, I thought as I slipped furtively out of the booth—the running, the dodging, the hiding. Before this, that had just been something that happened in a Hitchcock movie with a happy ending, only Hitchcock wasn't writing this scenario. The cops were, Eddie Woods was, and so were a thin man in a plaid suit, somebody called the Lion and. . . Helene.

Helene! All things began and ended with Helene.

She still had, I knew, the apartment on Mt. Prospect Avenue where we had lived together. She hadn't wanted to stay there, but with the housing situation, she had no choice.

On my keyring, I still had a key to her door. I hadn't meant to keep it. In fact, I had turned over my key to her when I moved out. This was one I thought I'd lost while we were still married. It had fallen into the lining of my overcoat through a hole in my pocket. I had never sent it back. It was a kind of link, I suppose. I'd never have used it, but there it was. If it hadn't been for the key, I wouldn't have thought of going to her apartment that day.

I hailed a cruising cab at the corner and had the cabby let me out two blocks past the Mt. Prospect address. Already I was acting like a criminal on the lam. I gave my head an angry shake and walked boldly down the street.

There was a painful rush of memory when I climbed the once-familiar stairs. The key still worked in Helene's door, and there the memories ended.

It wasn't the same place. She had changed everything—the furniture, the rugs, the drapes and even the pictures on the wall. Everything that would remind her of me

was gone. Everything now was done in the smooth, impersonal angles of functional modern design—as warm and livable as a nice, clean bathtub.

I closed the door softly and stepped from the small foyer into the living room. I could tell she wasn't in. There's something special about the quiet of empty rooms. But to make sure, I tiptoed to the kitchen, then to the bedroom. The white french phone was still on the shelf of a night table beside the angular bed. That hadn't been changed. I stood staring at it, but not for any sentimental reason. On the night table lay the small, pearl-handled gun I had once given her, as a gag, for Christmas.

My breath caught in my throat like sand. She *had* thought of killing me. She'd probably had the gun in her hand while I was talking to her over the phone.

But she had gone out and left the gun behind.

I walked over, picked it up, grimaced painfully, and dropped it into my pocket. As I turned, I saw something else on the dresser. An 8 by 10 photograph—of me! It had been enlarged from a snapshot, and for some reason it had caught Helene's fancy. There wasn't anything special about it. Against a background of fir trees and a lake, I was standing, facing the camera, dressed in slacks and a sport jacket. It lay there, unframed, on a brown manila envelope. I picked it up, wondering. There was suddenly something disturbing about that photograph.

I heard the outer door open and close. I dropped the photograph back on the dresser and quickly stepped to the side of the bedroom door.

Helene came into the living room. She walked with a sodden, lifeless step. She took off her hat, gave her head a shake, and threw the hat into a chair. She took off her coat, stood for a moment with her eyes closed, then walked to the sofa, the coat trailing from her hand. She sat with her head bowed. She flicked the back of her hand across her eyes. She was crying.

I took a step into the room and said, "Helene."

Her head jerked up. She crouched back into the cushions with a little cry. She hadn't recognized me.

I grimaced. "It's me—Mel."

She whispered, almost in horror, "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, Helene."

"No! Get out. Go away! Her mouth trembled, and she drew the coat up to her chin as if to hide behind it. "Please go away. Please, Mel." Her eyes refused to meet mine.

I said, "You were checking up on me."

She didn't answer. She lowered her head and closed her eyes.

Suddenly I was angry. "You've made up your mind, haven't you? You're going to the police. You're going to turn me in. Did you get affidavits from everybody? Did you get their signatures on the dotted line? How about Charley down at Charley's Bar and Grill? Did he sign? Or Eddie Woods? What about Jimmie the Oysterman? I must have shot my mouth off there, too. I shot it off every place else. What did Jimmie have to say about me? Did I leave his place waving a gun in the air, jump into a cab screaming Delmar's address at the top of my lungs? What's the good word from Jimmie the Oysterman?"

Her eyes flared and the softness went out of them. That's the way it had always been between us. Her temper caught fire from mine.

She sat up straight. "You told him you'd see that Frank never married me!" she cried. "Do you deny that?"

In one more minute it would have been another of our battle-royals—except that the anger ran out of me like mercury from a broken thermometer. I made a tired, defeated gesture.

"No," I said. "No, I don't deny it. In fact, I almost remember saying it. But I didn't kill Sundstrom. I didn't frame Delmar."

"What else would you say?" she said scornfully.

"Nothing, I suppose. It just happens to be the truth, that's all."

"The truth! The truth from you! I don't want your kind of truth. I'm going to tell you something before you go. Frank was almost certain you were the one who attacked him, but he wasn't sure, so he didn't say anything. Do you understand that? He's shielding you until he has proof. That's the kind of man Frank Delmar is!"

I gasped, "You believe that?"

"Believe it! I have proof! The threats you made, the murderous mood you were in when you left Jimmie's! Oh, Mel!" Her fierceness broke. She took her lip between her teeth and turned away from me. "I'm

not vindictive," she said in a muffled voice. "I'm doing what I think is right. Go away, Mel. Please go away. Please!"

With a kind of hopelessness, I said dully, "I'm still in love with you, and you're still in love with me. It's a mess, isn't it?"

Her head was down, her hands over her face, and her hair fell over her fingers. She didn't look up when I walked out. I felt like crying. Not because of the mess I was in, but because Helene was alone and desperately unhappy, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I started to walk. You walk because you want to be alone, and I wanted to be alone with all the little thoughts about Helene. I was just torturing myself, for I was thinking of all the might-have-been's and the way-it-used-to-be's and things like that, and it wasn't any good. It never is any good, and the first thing you know you're standing at the end of a wharf looking down at the oily, scummy surface of the river and wondering if you have the guts to break through it and stay there. It's no good.

At the corner of Lincoln and Peshine, a maverick cab came cruising along and I hailed it. I didn't give a particular damn whether I went any place or not, but it looked like a nice cave to hide in. When I got inside, though, my mind started to grind again, and instead of ordering him off for a ride in the country, I leaned forward and said:

"Go back about four blocks on Mt. Prospect until you come to a yellow roadster parked in front of an apartment house. Park in back of it and try to look inconspicuous. I'll take it from there."

"Okay, Cap," he said in a tired voice, and swung the cab around in a languid U-turn. As far as he was concerned, I could cut any shenanigan I wanted, as long as I paid for it. He drove with his right hand and let his left arm dangle outside the cab.

We didn't get back any too soon. As we passed the apartment, Helene came down the steps with her head lowered, as if she were in a hurry, crossed the sidewalk to her roadster, and ducked into it.

I said, "Follow that yellow car."

He turned his head, leered at me from under his sleepy lids and said in the same tired voice, "Okay, Cap."

He may have looked sleepy, but he wasn't. Helene drove, the way she always did, as if the beagles were at her heels. She dived into traffic like a scared rabbit, thread-

fled through it as if it were underbrush, skittered down the open streets, jumped the lights—and we stuck. We stuck to her clear down to Market Street, and when she parked and scurried into the Palmer Building, we were no more than twenty-five feet behind.

The driver looked around and said, "Okay, Cap?"

I jumped out. "Wait here," I said and sprinted for the building.

I had a feeling of terrible urgency. She wasn't in the lobby by the time I got there, of course, so I went up to the directory beside the bank of elevators and fingered my eye down until I came to—O'Connor, Leo X., att'y.

Delmar's lawyer. I didn't have to be taken by the hand and told in basic English where she had gone. She had gone to O'Connor's office. That was all too plain—as plain as a judge saying, "by the neck until dead." She and O'Connor were up there tying the noose. She had the rope, and O'Connor had the skill, and it was my neck. A nice little three-some. I felt sick.

I went back to the cab and crawled in. I still had a hunch, a forlorn tail-end of hope. I said, "Wait for a while," and put

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a cigarette in my mouth. I didn't light it. I kept it in my mouth until it got so wet the shredded tobacco came apart between my teeth, then I threw it away and took another.

The driver went to sleep, or looked as if he did. He slid down in his seat, tipped his hat forward over his eyes and put his feet up on the dash. I just sat there, chewing cigarettes, holding on with both hands. That was all I had, that scrap of washed-out hope.

She came out of the building fast, her chin up, her heels snapping on the sidewalk; and right behind her was O'Connor. I recognized him from the newspaper pictures. His coat and vest were open and flapping. He was a big man, with an important, prosperous paunch, and a flaming whiskey face, brighter because of the anger you could see burning in him. He hurried after her and grabbed the door of the car before she could slam it. He stood there arguing for a moment, then hunched his shoulders and jammed himself into the car beside her.

I took the driver by the shoulder and shook him. "Follow that car again!" I said breathlessly. "And don't lose it!"

He said mildly, "Okay, Cap," and with a careless flip of his hand, slipped the cab into low gear.

Helene drove as if she were fleeing from the sound of O'Connor's voice. You could see anger in the swooping, screaming turns she made, in the reckless darting, in the way she slammed on her brakes when there was no possibility of jumping a red light. We followed them clear back to her apartment on Mt. Prospect Avenue. She was out first and striding around the front of the car before O'Connor got his door open, but he was right on her heels again before she got to the front door. He was still arguing.

I waited until they were well inside, then got out of the cab. The driver looked at me with open hostility and said, "That'll be ten bucks, Cap."

I said, "What?"

"Ten bucks."

The bottom fell out of my stomach. Ten bucks wasn't the fare—it was blackmail, petty blackmail, reinforced by the gray bleakness in his lidded eyes. I felt my legs jerk with a panicky impulse to run. He must have seen something—maybe my picture in the paper, or perhaps there was a new story out on the killing, naming me.

I took out my wallet and worked a ten from it with trembling fingers. He snatched it contemptuously.

"You lousy, nosy private snoops," he sneered. "I can spot any of you a block off just by the smell. What is it, a divorce case, Cap? Do you like your work? Do you enjoy busting up a home? I sure would enjoy busting one of you right in the nose—and I will, one of these days. You tough guys, you lousy, stinking tough guys. You make me sick, every one of you!"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was sheer relief. I even felt friendly toward him.

"Listen," I said, "I'm not a detective. That was my wife, and I love her. I don't want a divorce. I've had one. She's really my ex-wife, but I want her back. That's what it's all about."

His face burned and his eyes fumbled for a place to hide. He mumbled, "Dammit, Cap, I'm sorry . . ." Then he blurted, "You can't blame me. A lousy snoop busted me and my wife up two years ago, on account of . . . well, it didn't mean nothing, to me. I was soused. The fare isn't ten bucks, Cap. It's an even dollar-forty."

I pushed back his offered hand with the ten bucks in it and said, "Keep it, brother. You earned it, believe me." I gave him a quick grin and walked away, feeling friendlier than ever. Maybe it's cockeyed, but things don't look so bad or hopeless when you find out other people have got themselves in a box, too, and are all mixed up trying to get out again.

Inside the apartment house, I took the key from the ring because I didn't want it to jangle with the others when I went in. That was what I was going to do—go right in on them and hear what was going on, hear what had made O'Connor so sore. He'd been steaming at the seams when he followed Helene from the car.

I fitted the key into her lock, took a long breath and held it as I eased the door open wide enough for me to go through. I left it open. I didn't want to take the chance of the latch snicking and startling them. I was lucky; neither of them noticed me as I slipped into the foyer.

CHAPTER FOUR.

BLARNEY AND BLUFF.

HELENE was sitting stiffly on the sofa, her lips drawn up and her eyes looking down at

the floor in that stubborn way she has when somebody is trying to talk her into something. O'Connor had his back to me, and he was talking very persuasively. He had one of those Irish voices, and he could use it the way a conductor uses the instruments in a symphony orchestra. Right now it was a muted cello, full of pathos.

"... sitting there alone in his cell," he was saying. "Frank Delmar is depending on you, Helene. You, and you alone, hold his life in your two hands. You have all the evidence that points to the real murderer of Sonny Sundstrom. You told me that much. You have the names of the men who can testify that your ex-husband was in a murderous rage and that he made threats. That testimony would free Frank Delmar, the man you love. Give me the names of those men." His voice throbbed.

My hand crept to the little gun in my pocket. Murderous rage. That's what he said I'd had. Well, I had it now, all right. I felt it crawl across my shoulder muscles and tighten on the back of my neck. I wanted to snatch out the gun and let O'Connor have everything that was in it, because it was his plot to put me where I was. I could see that. He had hinged the plot on Helene, so that she would damn me. The police would never believe anything Delmar had to say—but they would believe Helene, and the bartender from Charley's Grill on Market Street and Jimmie from Jimmie the Oysterman's. That was what O'Connor was playing for.

Helene looked steadily at him and said, "No. I'm not sure. I want to talk to Mel again. He was here, and I sent him away before I could find out. I want to talk to him again. I can tell when he's lying. I always could. I want to be sure." Her hands, in her lap, tightened obstinately.

"You want to be sure? Of course you want to be sure! Frank would be the first to say to you, 'Helene, don't, for God's sake, send another man to crouch in the shadow of the executioner!'" His voice was as clarion as the clear notes of a silver trumpet. Then it melted like a descending arpeggio of a harp.

"But you must face the facts. What do the facts say to you, Helene? Do they say that a certain man—who by chance happens to be your ex-husband—had whipped himself into a fever heat that demanded a killing to satisfy it, to quench it? Do the facts say that Melville Blaine hated Frank Delmar and attempted to kill him but was

prevented by Frank's friend Sundstrom, who lost *his* life saving the life of his friend? What do the facts say to you, Helene?"

Perhaps Helene didn't really waver under the spell of that magic voice of O'Connor's, but I thought she did. I stepped from behind the wall of the arch between the foyer and the living room, the gun tight and cold in my hand. Helene's eyes flew wide, and after a pause, O'Connor turned slowly.

I said harshly. "Tell her the rest of it, O'Connor. Tell her how you planned this frame-up. Go ahead, tell her that!"

He said warily, "Frame-up?" and turned back until he could see Helene's face from the corner of his eye. "Frame-up, Blaine?" He held his hands away from his sides, so that if I shot, it would have to be at an unarmed man and in cold blood.

"Frame-up, yes!" I said violently. I hated his pink, paunchy face. "Tell her about it before I—" I stopped dead. I was defeating myself with my own violence. I could see it in Helene's face, in the way comprehension spread and narrowed her eyes.

"Before you shoot me?" O'Connor said blandly. His eyes licked sideways at Helene to see how she was taking his attack. "The way you shot Sundstrom, Blaine? In jealous anger against the fiancé of your ex-wife? You love her, don't you?"

I looked straight at Helene. "Yes, I love her," I said steadily.

"And you didn't want Frank Delmar to have her, did you?"

"No, I didn't want Delmar to dirty her life."

"So you tried to kill him!" he said triumphantly.

I had been waiting for that. I said slowly, "No, I didn't try to kill him. Not because I didn't want to, but because I'm a damn fool. Because my way of solving my problems is to go out and get stinking drunk and make believe there isn't any problem. Ask Helene. Ask her why she divorced me. Go ahead, ask her."

He didn't ask her. He was smarter than that. He could see that I had her remembering. Instead, he smiled a little sadly. He looked at Helene and said gently, "If the defense of every murderer brought to justice was that he had never killed before and therefore he couldn't possibly be a murderer—there wouldn't be any murderers,

would there? There is murder in everybody. I have felt the impulse to kill, yet I am not a murderer. Have *you*, Helene, ever felt the desire to kill? Have you? Of course you have, but being a sane, balanced person you suppressed it. Mel here has admitted he is not a balanced person. When he has a problem to face, does he face it like a normal person? No, he does not. He goes out and drinks himself into a state of sodden insensibility. Is that the act of a person you can depend on? You don't have to answer me. I can see by your face that you know. And this is what I say!" his voice rose with emphasis. "A man who will drink to escape his duties as a husband, will kill to escape from his jealousy. A man who will get drunk is unbalanced, and a man who is unbalanced will kill!"

Helene's eyes turned slowly from O'Connor to me. They were dark and troubled, bewildered. Her fingers twisted in anguish in her lap.

O'Connor said severely to me, "And I'd like also to say, Blaine, that if you are trying merely to save your neck, you will continue to torment Helene. Go on—brow-beat her! Bludgeon her, shout at her. But I warn you, the more you do, the less she will believe you. Or speak softly to her, Blaine, play on her emotions. Get her to recall the happy days of your doomed marriage. Bewilder her with remembered happiness. But I warn you again. That won't work either."

He looked regretfully at Helene, as if it grieved him to shatter her misplaced loyalty, then turned back to me. His lips were sly.

"In fact," he said with apparent resignation, "I'll leave you two alone. Talk to her, convince her. If she believes you, I'll abide by her decision and—" He stopped, looked down at his hands and turned them slowly, palms upward. "And Frank Delmar will die," he finished quietly. "It's out of my hands and in yours." He smiled at Helene. "There is nothing more I can say or do."

He had put her in an impossible spot. There was more pure agony in her face than I ever wanted to see again.

I said quickly, "Wait a minute, O'Connor. I want to talk to you first. Let Helene go downstairs and have a cocktail. Go down to the bar, Helene," I said. "Have a drink and come back in a half hour. Have two cocktails, strong ones. You're all tied in a knot. Go ahead. Go downstairs."

Obediently, she pushed herself up from the sofa, but she moved with the brittle slowness of an old woman. Her cheeks looked haggard. "I'd like to think. . . for a while," she said mechanically.

As she passed me, I took her hand and stopped her, and at the same time slipped into the palm of her hand the key I had used to get into her apartment. It was the only way I could think of to tell her to come back as quickly as she could without letting O'Connor know.

Wildly improvising, I said, "And no police."

Her eyes were slightly questioning, but she said steadily, "No police, Mel."

I let her go.

O'Connor watched narrowly until the door had closed behind her. He crossed the room in swift strides and opened the door to a crack and watched again until I heard the whirr of the automatic elevator in the corridor outside. The gates clanged and he closed the door with a satisfied air. He came back into the room, buttoning his flapping vest. He took a cigar from a silver case, carefully cut off the end and put it in an ash tray.

He looked at me with shrewd eyes and said affably, "You're a smart one, Blaine. You had me going there for a minute. I thought you were going to make it. You almost did, you know."

I was willing to go along with his small talk. I wanted to give Helene time to get back. I walked away from him across the room and leaned against the radio, so he'd have to face me with his back to the door.

"You pulled out of it," I said, as bitterly as I could manage with my heart thundering. "You did all right."

He laughed quietly. "Well," he said, "a trick of the trade, you know. Just a trick of the trade. Let your opponent talk and hang him on his own words. I admire you, Blaine. You'd have made a good trial lawyer, for a fact."

I turned on the radio, praying that Helene wouldn't come back before the sound of the music would hide any noise she might make coming in. I didn't know how sharp his ears were. Damned sharp, I was afraid. The music swelled, and I tuned it so we could talk over the beat. Behind him I saw the door start to move inward.

"I didn't have much chance against you, I guess," I said, to focus his interest. "A good amateur can never beat a good professional."

"Oh, I don't know," he said condescendingly. "The trouble with a professional is that he sometimes gets a little sloppy out of overconfidence. You know, the last time I had one of these cases, I swore I'd never take another. I'm sick of Frank Delmar and his messes. Ever since I took that louse as a client, I've earned my money. Except for me, he'd have been hanged ten years ago. Ten years ago," he said impressively.

I could breathe easily, for Helene had slipped through the doorway and was now out of sight behind the partition that separated the foyer from the living room.

I said briskly, "O'Connor, I'm a businessman and you're a businessman, right?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Naturally."

"We can speak frankly?"

"You mean you're going to talk about money?"

"Naturally." I mimicked his tone.

He laughed. "That simplifies things. I thought you were going to be the injured hero again. By hell, if there's anything I hate it's an injured hero. I like practical men. We'll talk business. Frankly, I'm getting a hundred thousand dollars to get Delmar out of this mess, and I'm going to do it. Don't get any fancy ideas about that. That's a lot of money, and I can use a lot of money. But, being a businessman, I can see that I'll have to make a deal. I'll give you ten thousand dollars and time to get out of the country. But you'll have to leave me a written confession. I want something for my money."

"But I didn't kill Sundstrom, O'Connor."

"Bless and preserve us!" He rolled his eyes and said dryly, "So you *are* going to be the injured hero after all."

"No. I wanted to get that straight. I'll take your ten thousand, but I'm not going to run if Delmar didn't kill Sundstrom. Why should I? If there's a murderer loose, he might get caught, and why should I spend the rest of my life hiding in rat-holes if there's a chance that both Delmar and I will get out of it?"

"A good point," He glanced over his shoulder as if to reassure himself with the sight of the closed door.

I said, "Well, did he or didn't he?"

He eyed me speculatively. He muttered, "There's an outside chance that you might be able to persuade you ex-wife that you're free and clear. I don't think you can. I think I can beat you at every turn. . . ."

He brightened, "Come to think of it, even if you confess, Blaine, I can get you out of it, too. We can say you went up to talk to Delmar, and Sundstrom stuck his ugly face in the argument. His temper is notorious. We can say you killed him in self-defense, and in panic you slugged Delmar and made your escape. I could get you off on a plea like that, Blaine. By heaven, I could!" He started to laugh.

"That's the kind of case I love," he said eagerly. "Here you are, an innocent guy. You're being framed, but forget that. Delmar's reputation is foul; you go to his apartment to plead with him not to spoil the life of the girl you love . . . Man! What I could do with a case like that!"

"Then Delmar did kill Sundstrom?"

"Of course he killed him," O'Connor said contemptuously. "He had a perfect case himself and he spit it up a rainpipe, claiming he was attacked by an unknown assailant."

"Why did he kill Sundstrom?" I asked, as steadily as I could.

"He was Sundstrom's manager, and he was gypping the poor Swede every chance he got. Finally Sundstrom got wise, and he went up to beat it out of Frank. Frank is pretty dumb, but he's not a push-over for that kind of play. He put four bullets in Sundstrom. He should have yelled for the cops right away. Even with his reputation, I could have gotten him out of it. But no, he had to play it cozy. He got scared, and he blew his top and . . . pffft!" O'Connor snapped his fingers, smiled derisively. "Now," his voice turned brisk and business-like again, "I've made my proposition. What do you say?"

I looked up toward the empty arch behind him. "What should I say, Helene?"

He stood stricken, then whirled. Helene faced him, white-lipped, her hand to her cheek. She stood stiffly, then turned and ran out the apartment door.

O'Connor's mouth turned to rubber. The cigar slipped from between his fingers, and he stooped and picked it off the rug.

"There," he said wryly, "goes a hundred thousand dollars." Then harshly, "Well, you fool! What are you standing there for? At least give me the satisfaction of going after her. Give me *something* for my money!"

I ran past him.

HOMICIDE HONEYMOON

By TEDD THOMEY

*Rookie Cop Mario Giovani thought married life was swell—
until his loving dove flew the nest . . . and left a dead Romeo
in her place.*

TWO of them were lying there. Two silent people with arms outflung. Two people lying in a small room where the only motion was a wilted lace curtain, breeze-blown, lazily stroking the sill of the open window.

In the alley below that window, a pair of tanned six-year-olds were lagging little steel balls at a line scratched in the blond dirt. They wore loose swim trunks and squinted against the morning California sun. One of the four unwashed hands was folded round the crushed brass tube of an orange lipstick. Both boys looked up briefly when the sound of a ball split the air above them.

Up in the bedroom, Mario Giovani reached out a firm, hair-fostered hand and shut off the alarm clock's metallic stutter.

He stretched, and muscle roamed idly along his chunky bare arms. He didn't open his eyes, but he yawned. He combed fingers through his hair. Black hair, thick and naturally oily. He grinned suddenly, and there was a flash of straight teeth contrasting whitely against the dark olive color of his cheeks and strong jaw.

He grinned because he'd been married only four days and everything was swell. This wasn't like it had been with his mom and dad—all that fighting and name-calling in Italian. This made you feel good in the morning, even if you had gotten home at 2 a.m., even if you had to keep on working instead of taking a honeymoon.

"Hey, Aggie!" he said. "It's five to eight!"

No answer. That was Aggie for you. When she did a thing, she did it right. When she slept—she slept.

Mario yawned again. He wiggled his toes against the warmth of the sheets.

"Aggie, you'll miss the bus!" Heavy-lidded eyes still comfortably closed, he sent

a hand groping across to the other twin bed to tousle her yellow hair.

But instead of long, soft strands, he felt stubble and heard the wiry rasp of it as his fingers passed over a round chin.

Mario snatched away his hand as if it had been burned. He jerked to a sitting position.

He stared at his wife's bed.

A man was lying there. Bob Hern. He was covered by a pink wool blanket, one arm hanging down limply to the faded leaves and flowers of the old rug.

Mario's arm whipped aside his blankets and his bare heels thumped against the floor. Swiftly, he glanced around the bedroom.

"Aggie!" The word crumbled to dust in his throat.

Mario Giovani saw the large blot—so dark red it was almost black—on the blanket above Bob Hern's chest. He tore away the blanket.

Hern was fully clothed. He wore a rumpled gray flannel suit, a white shirt and a shamrock green tie with a design of gray whorls. The chest of his coat was blood-soaked. His pinkish hair was mussed, but the familiar pink was gone from his cheeks. They were gray except for the coppery glinting of one day's worth of whiskers.

Hern was dead. He had been dead for several hours. Mario could tell without touching him.

In his job, he'd seen death before. This kind of death, sudden and violent. But never had it been so close at hand, catapulted at him like this.

Mario stood still, his broad hands clenching his thighs through the thin cloth of his pajama pants. He stood there for a half-minute that was thirty separate, drawn-out ticks.

Turning quickly, he sped into the tiny

bathroom. The cracked white tiles were sharp and cold against his feet. She wasn't there.

"Aggie!" Panic was tugging at him, but he kicked it aside. She was safe. She had to be safe.

He ran through the tidy kitchen and out to the living room. Aggie wasn't there either. He sprang onto the sway-backed davenport and his fingernails sank into its green cotton slip-cover as he looked behind it. She wasn't there.

A twist of the glass knob and a yank of the redwood doors showed him that Aggie wasn't in the small bed that folded into the living room's east wall. Only one other place was left. Mario sprinted back to the bedroom and yanked open the closet door with the narrow, full-length mirror on it. His arms beat at the colorful dresses, the sport jackets and the extra blue serge patrolman's uniform hanging there.

Slamming the closet door, he dropped to his knees and glanced under the twin beds, half expecting to see Aggie lying there as silently as Hern.

She wasn't.

He got up and his eyes went automatically to the dead face on his wife's pillow. Thoughts were jumbling and crowding into his mind. Thoughts he hated. Bob Horn and Aggie had been engaged once. Bob Hern, tall and good-looking, junior executive at Hennessey's Department Store. He'd nearly married Aggie, until—

The thoughts went skittering crazily from Mario's brain as his dark brown eyes fell upon the open bureau drawer. The lowest one. The gun—his extra .38 revolver—was gone. The holster was lying on the pile of balled-up socks. It gaped at him empty.

Mario went quickly to Hern's side. Working nimbly, his fingers tugged at Hern's green tie, unbuttoned the white shirt and spread it open.

A .45 slug hadn't made that size hole. And it was too large to be the work of a .25. The best guess was that a .38 had put it there. Patrolman Mario Giovanni's .38.

Without realizing what he was doing, Mario put the chair back on its four mahogany legs and sat down. There was no expression on his face. He stared at a nail hole in the sky-blue wallpaper.

He didn't believe it. He absolutely didn't believe it. But the facts were there—long, finger-like facts pointing in one direction.

Aggie had hated Bob Hern. She'd killed

him and then run away, taking along the murder gun. The revolver of a man she'd married only four short days ago. . . .

For a long time, Mario Giovanni stayed there on the blue-velvet seat, listening to the sounds of kids playing marbles in the alley.

Abruptly, he got up. His eyes were blazing. He swore at himself for being nothing but a rookie—a seven months' cop who couldn't tell a clue from a hole in the ground.

Aggie couldn't have done it. She wasn't the type. She was gentle and feminine. She hated guns, hated the fact that Mario had to wear his service .38 whether in uniform or not. Maybe it was just a coincidence that she wasn't here. Maybe she'd decided to spend the night with her mom and dad in Compton.

Mario started back to the living room. In the bedroom doorway, he paused. His bare toe had touched something sticky on the rug. An orange-colored blob. Reaching down, he poked it with a forefinger. He sniffed it. It was lipstick, slightly perfumed. Aggie must have dropped it.

Returning to the living room, Mario picked up the phone. As he dialed a number, he wondered how in the hell Bob Hern's body had gotten into the apartment.

"Hello?" said Mrs. Haagensen, Aggie's mother.

"This is Mario." He tried to keep the concern from his voice. "Did Aggie stay over there last night?"

"Why, no. Wasn't she with you?"

Mario hesitated. He didn't want to upset Mrs. Haagensen. "I thought she was, but I guess I was mistaken. I was on the beat till two this morning and when I got in I went right to bed without putting the lights on. I—"

"I don't understand. . . ." Mrs. Haagensen's voice trailed off. Mario could visualize her standing in her kitchen, a small plump woman. Her brown hair—once it had been blonde like Aggie's—was fixed in a tight shiny bun, and she almost had to stand on tip-toe to reach the wall telephone's black mouth.

"It's nothing to worry about," added Mario. "She probably left me a note. That's it—there's probably a note around here some place."

He knew there was no note. And he also knew that Mrs. Haagensen could tell he was lying. When he was nervous like this, he couldn't tell even a small lie without his tongue tripping all over itself.

"I don't like it," said Mrs. Haagensen. "You two married only a few days and all." She paused. "Have you phoned Vivian? She used to stay nights with Vivian sometimes."

"No," said Mario. "But I will right away. Thank you. Good-by."

He put the phone down quickly, feeling sick to his stomach. With a dry tongue, he licked his lips. Everything was worse now. More and more it looked as if Aggie had run away.

Again he lifted the phone. He knew he should dial the homicide inspectors and tell them all about it. But he couldn't. They'd start a city-wide search for Aggie. Her picture would be in all the papers, and radios would crackle with her name. Agnes Giovani, killer-bride of a cop. And when they found her and arrested her, she'd be scared. She'd say the wrong thing, get herself in deeper and deeper.

No, he couldn't phone the inspectors— not till he'd tried to find her first himself.

His forefinger spun the dial wheel again. Six, then seven times, the receiver rang metallically in his ear before Vivian Mason answered.

"Yes?" she asked in her silken tone.

"Hello," he said. "This is—"

"You don't have to tell me!" cut in Vivian. "I'd know your voice anywhere, Mario. Such a nice voice. . . ."

Mario swallowed. Vivian always made him feel uncomfortable. Like Aggie, she was blonde, but prettier—quite a bit prettier. Her eyes were nearly violet, and she wore the brightest lip rouges, the highest heels, the lowest-cut blouses. He'd liked Vivian a lot—until he met Aggie. Aggie was more fun. She got a kick out of baseball and tennis and wasn't afraid to get her hair wet at the beach. She was more real—at least he'd thought so until this morning.

"I was wondering," said Mario. He hesitated and at the same time heard a small thumping sound at the other end of the line.

"Sam!" shouted Vivian. "Get down from there! Excuse me a minute, Mario."

The phone clattered as Vivian set it down. She returned after a moment.

"Sorry, Mario. That damn cat was up on the mantle again after the goldfish and knocked down a book. Now what were you wondering about?"

"Did Aggie spend the night with you by

any chance?" Breath tight in his chest, he waited for her answer.

Vivian laughed. "Well, the honeymoon's over already! What did she do, Mario, run home to mother?"

"No!" he said angrily. "I had to work last night and she probably got scared being by herself!"

"I don't know," laughed Vivian. "Sounds like Reno to me!" Her voice softened, becoming almost husky. "You know, Mario, honey, I'm still carrying a big torch for you. I'll be home tonight if you'd like to—"

"Thank you, but I'll be busy." Mario let the phone drop to its cradle.

As he replaced it, the doorbell rang with the high nervous tone of a spoon striking a glass of water.

He didn't want to answer it. He had enough on his mind. But he knew whoever it was out on the small porch had seen him through the glass of the front door. He went over and opened the door.

Standing on the porch, revolving a faded green felt hat in his big-knuckled hands, was George Contrera. He didn't say anything. He just looked at Mario.

Mario scowled and passed his hand impatiently across his forehead. "Sorry, George. Can't go with you this morning. Something's come up."

Anger sprang into George Contrera's eyes. They were oily brown eyes looking out of an oily brown face. Contrera was in his late thirties. He was tall and his hair was cut so short it stuck up like iron-gray pins. His thin denim shirt and pants had been washed and mended many times.

"You said you'd go!" he accused. "I need that job. And you promised!"

"I know, but we'll have to do it tomorrow or some time."

Contrera began to whine. "Look here, sir! If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't be out of a job. You arrested me, so I sat in that jail for one hundred and eighty-three days. You—"

"Shut up!" barked Mario. "It wasn't my fault you tried to rob that gas station." He started to shut the door. "I'll get in touch with you later about the job."

"Yes, sir!" There was little respect in the word and much bitterness. Narrow shoulders slumping, Contrera turned and went down the long flight of steps.

Mario closed the door.

He returned to the bedroom, the silent bedroom with the silent figure on his wife's bed. Glancing briefly at Hern's gray face,

he picked up his tan gabardine slacks. His mind was made up. He'd have to go out and find her. Because until he could talk to her, until he could see the expression her blue eyes and hear her voice—not until then would he know for sure whether Aggie was guilty.

And all he could allow himself was an hour. He couldn't delay phoning the homicide inspectors for more than an hour. He swore.

A short, rotten hour. One hour to find his wife in a city of three hundred thousand. One hour to find evidence to clear her if she wasn't guilty. One hour to save her life and his.

Stepping into the slacks, he yanked up the zipper and adjusted the stiff new leather holster containing his service .38. Down in the alley, somebody screamed.

Mario sped to the open window. Two yelling boys in swim trunks were clapping their small hands across their mouths and performing an Indian war dance around a rusty trash barrel. Their faces and skinny chests were streaked with orange war paint.

Mario started to turn from the window—and then from the edge of his eye he saw her.

Aggie.

At the narrow mouth of the alley, half a block away. But she wasn't coming home. She was walking quickly away.

There was a thick roaring in Mario's ears as he poked his bare feet into his shiny cordovan oxfords and grabbed the blue shirt up off the rug. He ran through the kitchen, his left arm stabbing the air, trying to find the shirt sleeve flapping out behind him.

Down the front steps he went, taking them three at a time. He ran along the narrow concrete path past the purple dahlias and yellow nasturtiums and past the fat garbage that was brown with running ants.

She'd crossed Twenty-third Street and was walking in the alley beyond. Stuffing in his shirt tail, Mario sprinted over the rutted earth.

When he was a hundred yards behind her, he shouted. "Aggie!"

She didn't stop. She walked even faster, the paper shopping bag swinging in her hand.

His lungs were hot and heavy in his chest by the time he caught her elbow and yanked her to a stop.

He blurted: "Aggie!"

And then he felt as if he'd been slugged across the eyes with a night stick.

The girl wasn't Aggie. This blonde had small brown eyes, a bump on her nose and a small, angry mouth.

"Say! What d'you think you're doing!" She tore away from his grasp.

"Sorry," said Mario. He took out his black leather wallet, fumbled it open and showed his identification. "Police Department," he muttered. "Made a mistake. . . ."

Turning, he walked slowly back down the alley, his sockless feet sliding around in the untied oxfords. He felt sick. From the back that girl had been a dead ringer for Aggie. She walked the same way, held her shoulders in the same erect manner. He should've known by the hair-do and the clothes that that wasn't Aggie. But he wanted so desperately to believe it was her that his eyes had run away with his brain.

He went back to the bedroom and stood beside the dresser, his hands deep in his pockets. He'd been a fool. An apple-green rookie. Instead of thinking things through calmly, the way an experienced cop would've done, he'd bolted out there like a scalded dog.

He glanced at the crystal face of his wrist watch. It was eight-twenty and he'd discovered the body nearly half an hour ago. By nine-fifteen at the latest he would have to phone headquarters—and they'd be sure to grill him about the delay. Hell, they might even figure he'd killed Bob Hern.

He forced himself to think slowly. There were two ways of looking at it. Either Aggie had killed Hern, or somebody else had. She didn't like Bob Hern, there was no doubt about that. But did she hate him enough to kill?

He was one of the assistant managers at Hennessey's where Aggie had worked in the cosmetic section. They'd been engaged, but Aggie had broken it off. She said Hern was too immature, too headstrong. He'd proved that later by having her fired for some small thing. Hern was quite a power around the store. Anybody could be a power if his father was the store's vice president.

Thoughtfully, Mario scrubbed his fingertips through his thick dark hair. Hern's body must have been in the bed all night. It was there when Mario came in. If he hadn't been so careful not to wake Aggie, if he had put on the lights, he would have discovered the body then.

It had been a grim joke—hardly the sort of thing Aggie would do. Maybe it was somebody else's idea of humor. Someone with a funny sense of proportion, funny enough to know what a shock it would be when Mario found the body beside him in the morning. It would have to be someone with a grudge against me, he thought. Someone who, at the same time, had a reason for wanting Hern dead.

What about George Contrera? He was a strange character, odd enough to pull such a trick. Contrera was the first guy Mario had ever arrested. Three days after he was sworn into the Department, Mario had caught Contrera robbing a gas station. It had been Contrera's first offense and he'd gotten off lightly. After serving his time, he couldn't get a job. Mario felt sorry for him and made arrangements to introduce him to the boss of a lumber yard this morning. But he hadn't realized before what a character Contrera was. For that jail sentence Contrera blamed, not himself, but Mario.

The war-whooping was still going on down in the alley. Mario stepped over to the window and watched the small boys who were now throwing sticks that were supposed to be flaming arrows. He wondered, as he stood there, if Frank Dutton could be mixed up in Hern's murder.

Dutton was the only other important arrest that Mario had made. It was Dutton's fourth arrest for picking pockets and he'd drawn a stiff sentence. There'd been hatred in his eyes when he left the police station for the trip to San Quentin. Hatred for Mario Giovanni. Two nights ago Dutton and some others had escaped from Quentin. Was it possible that Dutton, wanting revenge, had—

For the first time, Mario really noticed the color of the war paint the six-year-olds had daubed on their tanned bodies. Orange. He turned and went back to the bedroom doorway where he'd stepped on a blob of color right after finding Hern's body. The two shades matched—and it was the kind of lipstick Aggie used to wear.

Returning to the window, he shouted down: "Hello, there, fellows. What're you supposed to be—Cherokees or Navajos?"

They stopped throwing sticks. One said: "Naw, we're Indians!"

"Oh," said Mario. "Where'd you get the paint?"

One of them held up a crushed brass tube. "Found this in the alley."

"I'll give you a quarter for it."

The boys immediately forgot they were Indians and became financiers. "Cash?" one asked.

Mario tossed down the coin. The boys tossed up the brass tube. Stepping away from the window, Mario examined it. It was orange lipstick, all right, and the tube had been smashed, probably stepped on, explaining the stain on the rug.

He felt excitement pulling at him. The tube was evidence, damned important evidence. Hurriedly, he slipped into a conservative brown sport jacket, which concealed the holster at his hip, and went out the front door. He wasn't sure, but there was a good chance now that Mario Giovanni finally knew where he was going. . . .

Rattling from rut to rut in his 1934 coupe, Mario kept thinking about the lipstick and a dark warm California night about a month ago. He and Aggie had stood together on the outermost rim of Rainbow Pier, a tremendous bow of soft-colored lights which pushed out into the ocean south of Long Beach.

They'd held hands and watched the white manes of the waves breaking against the rocks below. He didn't remember exactly what started it, but they began criticizing one another in fun. Blue eyes impish, Aggie said she absolutely couldn't stand the green necktie he was wearing. She said it looked like a piece of anemic celery.

Mario laughed and said he didn't like her orange lipstick because it was the same kind Vivian wore—and he didn't think she should go around reminding him of former girl friends. So they had a little ceremony. Mario took off the tie and dropped it into the black waves. Aggie took the brass tube from her purse and tossed it in. And he'd spent the next ten minutes kissing off the rest of the orange lipstick.

He was sure Aggie hadn't bought another one. So how had the orange lipstick got on the rug? Maybe Vivian would know. Maybe Vivian put it there.

Vivian lived in a small yellow-shuttered white cottage on East Tenth Street. A long ambulance and a black and white police car were parked in front. Mario slammed his old coupe against the curb and was stepping out before the wheels stopped rolling.

"Yes. Around midnight. Mario had to work last night and she was afraid to stay
"Yeah," said the attendant. "A crazy dame practically committed suicide."

"Blonde?"

The attendant nodded and Mario hurried onto the porch. That crazy Vivian, he thought. Why in the hell would she want to kill herself?

He went through the open front door and into the living room. Standing in one corner, talking in low tones, were two patrolmen in blue serge and—

Vivian Mason.

Mario heard himself yell. Vivian! But you—I thought it was you!"

She ran toward him. She was wearing a long, tomato-red negligee with lace froth at the wrists and throat. Her straight yellow hair was pinned back with gold buckles. Tears glistened wetly in her violet eyes as she tumbled against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"It's Aggie!" she cried. "It was awful. There was a bottle of sleeping tablets in the medicine cabinet—"

Mario untrapped Vivian's hand from his neck and twisted around. As he bolted through the bedroom door, his blood seemed cold thin water in his veins.

His wife of four days was lying on the rumpled, unmade bed in the nightgown he'd given her for her birthday. Mario shouldered the attendant aside and bent over her.

"Aggie!" he whispered hoarsely.
"Aggie!"

As he strode up the flagstone path, a man in a white jacket came out the front door—an ambulance attendant.

"Somebody sick in there?" asked Mario.

Her eyes were closed and droplets of perspiration clung to her dark eyelids. Her face was an oval as pale as paper. There was no color to her lips, but her long hair, unbrushed, was a tangle of brilliant gold fanning across the crumpled hump of the pillow.

She lay there as motionless as the blankets.

"Good lord!" Mario yelled at the attendant. "Is she all right?"

"I don't know," said the attendant, placing shining instruments in a brown leather bag. "We pumped out her stomach. . . ." He took Mario's arm. "You keep out of here for a while. I'll let you know when you can come back."

Mario walked stiffly out to the living room. He dropped into the first chair that brushed his leg. The .38's holster caught in the upholstery and pressed awkwardly against his hip but he hardly noticed it. Hands jammed across his face, he sat slumped forward.

After a while, he heard Vivian talking to the two patrolmen. Her voice was calm, but had a taut undertone.

"I've known Aggie for years," Vivian said. "And her husband."

She paused. "That's him over there. He's a policeman, too."

"You say she phoned you last night?" asked one of the patrolmen.

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by herself. So she asked if she could spend the night here with me and, of course, I said fine. When she came over she was terribly nervous, but I thought that was natural because she always was afraid when she was alone."

"What about this business with the gun and the man she says she shot?"

Mario looked up sharply.

"I'm getting to that," said Vivian. "She couldn't sleep, so I fixed her a sleeping tablet. Then this morning she suddenly woke me up yelling about Bob Hern and how she'd shot him last night. She opened her purse and there was a gun in it and everything—and I, well, I just didn't know what to do."

The patrolman pointed to a gun lying on an end-table. "That gun?"

Vivian nodded her yellow head. Mario didn't have to look twice to know it was the extra .38 he'd kept in the lower bureau drawer.

"She was hysterical," added Vivian. "She kept crying that she'd killed Bob Hern because he was going to tell Mario that she and Bob were still—were still in love."

Vivian was marching nervously up and down, the red hem of her negligee sweeping the rug. "I calmed her down," she explained. "At least I thought I did. I went out to fix breakfast. When I went back to the bedroom, there was the empty bottle of tablets and I couldn't wake her up. I even slapped her. And then I got scared and phoned the—"

Taking her moist hand in his, Mario said softly, "Thank God!"

This time Aggie was awake.

"Hello . . ." whispered Aggie. "Gee, do I feel—funny."

With a corner of the sheet, Mario blotted the perspiration from her forehead. He didn't want to question her; he didn't want to cause her any more pain but he had to know.

"Aggie," he said gently. "Did you take the sleeping tablets?"

The blue eyes blinked. "Tablets?"

He nodded. "Did you take some?"

"No. Just the milk Vivian fixed for me this morning. It—tasted funny."

"Milk!" Mario gripped Aggie's hand. "Can you tell me the rest—everything that happened last night."

She nodded. The words came slowly, half-whispered. "Vivian phoned me last

night. She asked would I like to spend the night with her. She knew I didn't like to be alone. I told her about the gun in the bureau, but I was still a little afraid so I said yes. I wrote you a note and took a cab—"

Mario interrupted. "I knew it! I knew you must have left a note!"

"Yes," said Aggie weakly. "Well, when I got here Vivian and Bob Hern were drinking. Bob was as stiff as the bottle. I excused myself and went right to bed. This morning when we got up, Vivian fixed me the milk. I drank it and then the phone rang and—and it was you, Mario, but—"

Aggie shook her head drowsily. "I got so sleepy I dropped the glass. And that's all—that's all I remember. . . ."

Mario straightened up. "It's enough, honey."

He returned to the living room and introduced himself to the patrolmen. Then he turned to Vivian and his voice was steady.

"Vivian, were you over at my apartment last night?"

"No. Why?"

"You're sure, absolutely sure?"

"Of course. You think I'd lie to you?"

In reply, Mario drew the crushed brass lipstick from his pocket.

Instantly, Vivian's hand snatched at it. "Where'd you get that! I threw it out the win—" She snapped off the sentence, realizing she'd said too much.

Mario kept his voice low, but there was a cutting edge to it. "You killed Bob Hern, Vivian. And you fed Aggie the sleeping tablets, trying to make it look like she tried suicide after shooting Hern. You got Hern drunk and took the keys from Aggie's purse after she was asleep. You took Hern to our place and shot him with the gun Aggie mentioned was in the drawer!"

"No!" Vivian's slim fingers seized Mario's arm. "Don't say such things!"

Mario yanked his arm away. "You dropped the lipstick in our bedroom and it got stepped on, putting a smear on the rug. So you tossed the broken tube out of the window."

He strode back into the bedroom and yanked open the closet door. A dozen pairs of feminine shoes were in colorful rows on the floor.

[Continued on page 64]

The incredible true story of a doomed man who was . . .

SAVED BY THE NOOSE

By SKIPPY ADELMAN

MILT TURNER, his youthful face pale and his voice imploring, stood on the scaffold, beside a deputy sheriff who was flexing a noose at the end of a heavy rope, and spoke to the crowd of nearly one thousand people who had come to see him die:

"You are taking the life of an innocent man! There are people here who know who did commit the crime. If they will come forward and confess, I will go free!"

His plea was received in silence. Most of the crowd, which was composed of Turner's neighbors, were certain that he had killed Jake Hanson.

There had been bad feeling between the Turner and Hanson clans. One evening, Jake Hanson and his brother Bob were riding horseback through the land adjoining the Turner farm. They had been about to ford a small stream when suddenly a shot had rung out from some bushes on the other side. Jake Hanson pitched from the saddle, dead before he hit the ground. His brother saw the bushwhacker leave his cover and run. There had been very little light for identification, but in court Bob Hanson had sworn that the man he saw was Milt Turner.

Now, Turner, his hands tied behind him and beads of sweat collecting on his white forehead, looked imploringly at the gaping crowd. His intense, listening attitude was suddenly interrupted when the deputy sheriff put the thick, rough rope around his neck. A spasm of pain and hopelessness crossed his face; then he grew calm.

The deputy took the boy's arm and gently guided him a step to the left, so that Turner's feet were directly over the trap. The deputy was about to leave Turner's side when he noticed that about eight inches of rope were sticking out at the end of the hangman's knot. He paused a moment to whip out his pocket knife and cut the end flush with the knot.

The deputy hurried to the side of the scaffold and put his hand on the lever that would open the trap.

Daylight suddenly appeared under Turner's feet. He shot downward like a stone. But his dropping body, instead of being brought up short by the end of the rope, fell all the way to the floor, where he landed with a thud. The rope, its noose gone, swung lazily over him. The crowd stared unbelievably for a moment and then, as from one throat, uttered a roar of amazement. The knot, weakened by having its end cut flush, had slipped.

Turner seemed to be the calmest person in the group. He got to his feet. The cap had fallen from his head. He turned and walked up the scaffold again, saying to the deputy, "Let's get this over with."

He stood next to the trap, calmly waiting for the subsequent development. The deputy sheriff, moving mechanically, walked over to him. He called down to the physician who was to certify Turner's death, "Toss up the rope, will you, Doctor?"

The doctor moved to obey, putting his hand around the thick strands of hemp. Then revulsion overcame him. He threw the end away and said in a loud voice, "I'll do no such damned thing. That's boy's been hanged once too often as it is."

This acted upon the crowd as a call to action. Behaving as if they had just seen the hand of God at work, they crowded around the scaffold menacingly, warning the sheriff and his deputies not to hang Turner.

The sheriff mounted the scaffold and held up his hand for silence. "Is there a lawyer among you?" he shouted. A figure detached itself from the crowd and pointed the sheriff. They whispered together for a moment and the sheriff reluctantly faced the crowd. "The law says I have to hang him until he's dead. I must obey the law."

At this point the preacher who had attended Turner mounted the scaffold. He shouted at the crowd, "All who want to see this boy hanged a second time, hold up your hands." Not a hand was raised.

The crowd began cheering their own decision and pressed closed around the scaffold. The sheriff whispered a short command to his men, and they formed a flying wedge, hurriedly bringing Turner back to his cell.

Turner's family immediately resumed their attempts to free him legally or at least to prevent his death. At this point Bob Hanson, the chief witness against Turner,

came forward and admitted that he might have made a mistake.

Turner's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He spent four years at the state farm and then was given a pardon. But the case doesn't end here. Nineteen years later, a neighbor of the Turner's, one Fred Stoll, wandered into a revival meeting. Carried away by the atmosphere, he ran forward and confessed to having murdered Jake Hanson.

Stoll was never charged with the crime, but the state legislature passed a bill granting Turner \$5,000 as partial payment for the agony he had endured.

Homicide Honeymoon

(Continued from page 62)

On the sole of a green alligator pump he found a smear of orange.

"That proves it, Vivian," he said.

She glanced at the shoes—and her lower lip trembled. "I know, Mario. I—I was such a fool. That Bob Hern—I hated him! He thought I was swell to have fun with, but when it came down to marrying me—" Her voice broke.

As Mario stood watching, she clamped her arms around his neck. "Anyway, Mario, I never loved him. I've always loved you! I couldn't stand it when Aggie got you—and I thought if I killed Bob Hern then I could marry you!"

"A hell of a lot of sense that makes!"

"It's true!" she cried. "I loved you so much I didn't want to kill Aggie because I was afraid they might accuse you! That's why I called the ambulance right after she took the milk. I was sure they would arrest her. And Mario—"

Mario spoke through tightly closed teeth. "You didn't want to save Aggie. You waited as long as you could before calling the ambulance. You knew when I phoned you that I was trying to find her before I reported the murder. And you wanted to

be sure I wouldn't have a chance to prove Aggie was innocent!"

"Yes, Mario." Vivian's warm, perfumed lips brushed his cheek. "Mario," she whispered anxiously. "You're a policeman. You can think of some way of getting me off, can't you honey?"

He broke away and shoved her against the door. "No!" he exploded.

Vivian's mouth became warped. She was suddenly a snarling, scratching she-cat. She threw herself at him.

He caught her wrist and held the shuddering, shrieking weight of her off at arm's length until the two patrolmen got handcuffs in place.

They led Vivian to the door. She brushed a strand of yellow hair from her forehead. She slipped a hand inside the arm of the younger patrolman, the handsome one with the neat mustache.

"I like policeman," she said. Her violet eyes looked up at him softly. "I'm going to especially enjoy riding to the station with you. . . ."

But Mario didn't hear her. He was sitting on the edge of Aggie's bed, holding her hand and smiling down at her.



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